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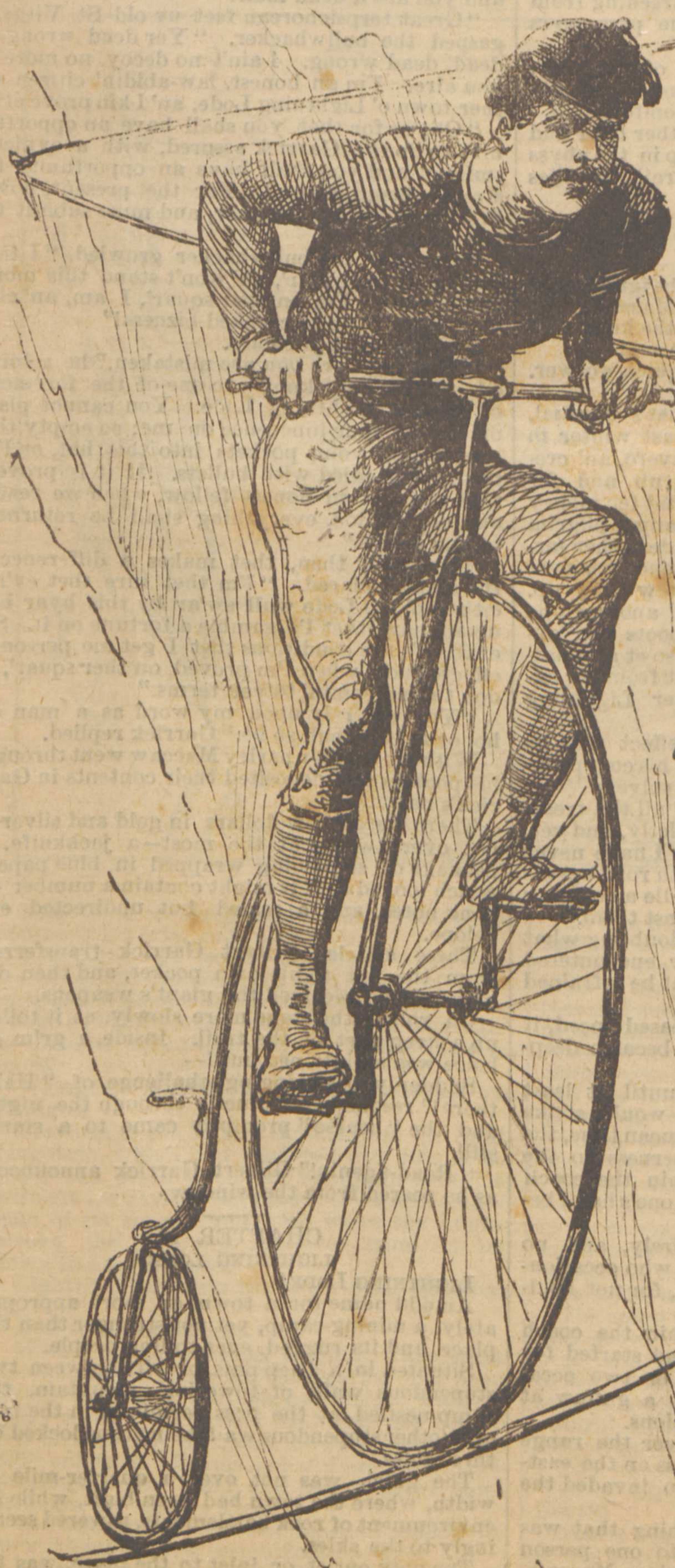
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BICYCLE BEN OR THE

LION OF LIGHTNING LODE

BY
ED. L. WHEELER

CHAPTER I.

"ROAD AGENTS!" SAID GILBERT GARRICK.

"LIGHTNING LODE," echoed a big man, of six who were holding a conversation, as a Nor'-west-bound coach was whirling along a precipitous mountain-trail, the coach at times standing upon two wheels, and causing the hair of the passengers to literally stand upon end—"Lightning Lode?—waal I should short up a snake—a regular rat-eyed snake what pops up thr'u a knot-hole in ther floor, when ye'r least expectin' et, and aire shaky. Had 'em! Ef I didn't ring in thirty-four of 'em, one night, and learn 'em all tricks, I'm a roarin' he-up-and-haw from Hydrofoby Gulch. 'Skuse me—didn't interdooce myself, but you can bet I'm Mambrinus Maccaw, from East Saginaw—once was a friend to Adam Forepaw. An' when I say I do know o' ther town o' Lightnin' Lode, I'm not prevaricatin' in ther least, you bet, fer that's whar I'm goin' ter plant my pennant, afore et's half an hour moon-up."

And as he uttered this declaration, the big

man, who had a grotesque and baboon-like countenance, marked by a huge, fiery appendage with a seed wart upon the end of it, a large mouth, and weather-bleached beard, stained with tobacco-juice—this individual, dirty and ragged of attire, smiled.

And such a smile!

It was like a burst of sunshine from a bank of clouds.

The other five passengers regarded the bullwhacker with curiosity not unmingled with distrust, for he was truly a seedy and repulsive-looking individual, and the wild country through which the stage-route lay, was a particularly dark and dangerous one, and known to be infested by road-agents, and footpads, whose source of livelihood was rapine and murder.

Among the five passengers, the most noticeable one was a man of about five-and-thirty years. He was elegantly formed, of commanding stature, and was as handsome a man as one would encounter in a long journey;—with a high forehead, dark brown eyes, and a magnificent glossy brown beard, he was one whose acquaintance would naturally be sought by gentlemen as well as ladies.

His attire was of the best, and every indication went to prove that he was a man of culture, wealth, and affluence.

He had announced himself to his fellow-passengers as Gilbert Garrick, of New York, and his destination as Lightning Lode, a new mining "strike," far up in the mountains; and his inquiry about the place had elicited the remarks of Mambrinus Maccaw.

The remaining four men, with one exception, were roughly-dressed, honest-faced miners, who, also, were *en route* for the new camp, up near where the clouds kissed the mountain-tops.

The exception was a negro, shabbily attired, and who, although as black as the ace of spades, was not what could be called a homely specimen of his race. He had a tremendous large head, covered with tightly-curling black hair; keen, observant eyes, and a thin-lipped mouth, which, when he laughed, exposed two even rows of pearly teeth.

He was also well formed, and appeared to be about seventeen years of age.

The stage had been several hours on its journey ere any conversation was heard, each man evidently having been absorbed in his own reflections.

The inquiry of Gilbert Garrick, however, unloosened the tongue of the redoubtable Mambrinus, and that seemed to break the spell.

"Yas, Lightnin' Lode aire as fly a camp as crops out o' ther rock anywhere in the West," Maccaw went on, voluntarily. "She ain't but five months old, an' hes got six bum-up saloons, two howtels, a dance-house, an' did hev a church, in one shanty, but thet thing kinder petered out, an' Red Ryan hes got ther shebang now fer a poker room."

"Indeed! I suppose you are pretty well acquainted with the citizens of the camp?" Mr. Garrick said, interrogatively.

"Aire I? Great silver sand-jigs of old St. Vitus! I should smole a smile—I should. Know 'em?—yes, sir-ee, every man, woman an' child, tho' I'll agree ter admit that thar ain't but one babe, an' not many o' the female sex in ther town, an' one on 'em is Kid Glove Kate!"

"Ah! is that so? And who is Kid Glove Kate?"

"Waal, thar's whar ye hit me, pardner. I dunno no more erbout et than you do, an' I reckon no one knows ary a bit more'n I do. She's a kerackter."

"In what particular way?"

"Oh, she's a hull block o' myst'ry, wi' two or three tenement-houses throw'd in. She dresses in deep mournin', an' don't do much else nor hang around ther saloons. She wears a thick veil over her face, what's got eye-holes, a nose-hole an' a mouth-hole cut inter it, an' wears kid gloves on her hand, so that ye ken't tell whether she's white or not, 'cept by her nose. She wears six gold-plated revolvers in her belt, an' hes plugged three galoots fer makin' insultin' remarks ter her."

"What is her object in hanging about the saloons?" inquired Garrick, interestedly. "Does she gamble?"

"Only oncet in awhile—when she's short o' money, I reckon, but she drinks purty stiff, fer a woman. Great skippin'-rope jigs uv old Saint Vitus! She kin pour down nigh onter as much as yer 'umble sarvent—ther original hydra-headed, howlin' he-up-an'-haw from Hydrophobia Gulch. An', as fer her name, why she allowed Kate would do her, an' so we call her Kid Glove Kate."

"Very singular that a woman should lead such a life."

"Oh! she's respectable, you bet yer last dollar on that!" and growing enthusiastic over the fact the bullwhacker clapped his huge hands together in a way that created a deafening report. "Ef ye don't believe et why jest step up to her an' ax her fer a kiss, an', by ther great trumpet o' Gabr'el, she'll put so many shots thr'u' yer cabeza in a holy seckint tuet ye'll think you've bin foolin' with ther hind leg o' a muel, an' that muel a kicker!"

"Oh! I doubt not that she is as you assume," Garrick agreed, with a faint smile. "And how about the one babe you alluded to?"

"Oh! thet air a different case. Some on-merciful person left a babby on ther steps o' ther Snortin' Snake Hotel 'bout a week ago one night, an' as no owner could be found fer et, et war adopted by Red Ryan, who runs ther poker shop. Guess et'll be all right. Red aire a mean feller in some respects, but I don't allow thet he'd treat a little innercent baby werry bad."

"Oh! I should hope not. What sex was this child—male or female?"

"A boy, an' a bouncer, ye kin bet!"

This description appeared to satisfy Mr. Garrick's curiosity in the fullest sense, for he relapsed into silence.

Indeed, it was hard to converse with any degree of understanding, for the stage was tearing along at a fearful speed and careening from side to side in a way that kept the passengers busy in holding their seats.

The driver was a veteran, full of bug-juice, and the stage could go none too fast for his liking, regardless of the passengers' comfort.

The sun went down within another hour and night's shadows were already deep in the abyss which yawned at one side of the trail for miles and miles.

Once the sun was set it was not long in getting dark and the loneliest part of the trail was yet to be traveled.

Mr. Gilbert Garrick appeared to be ignorant of this fact until informed of it by Maccaw, who touched him interrogatively upon the knee.

"S'pose yer carry a pop, eh?" he said.

"I am armed, yes," was the quick answer. "Why?"

"Oh! nothin' much—nothin' that's unusual, yer know; but, yer savvy, ther last winter in these yere parts war purticklar severe, an' created much appetite, both fer grub and fer greenbacks. Tharfore, ther demand fer money exceedin' ther supply o' grub, many a pilgrim who might ha' been a minister, under other circumstances, hes bin forced to influence whoever comes along wi' a wad o' money, tew divy up. Ther winter hev passed away, an' another one ain't fur off, but yer can bet yer boots ther appetite increases as et grows older, so et aire naterally sure thet we will get a visit from our exacting uncle afore we strike ther Lightning Lode."

Gilbert Garrick nodded, to the effect that he understood, and diving down into his coat pocket, drew forth a pair of incased revolvers.

"I presume we can take care of all the treasure there is on board," he said, quietly, and yet, not without sarcasm. "Although I have never had many personal encounters with road-agents I dare say I would be able to handle a dozen or more of them, should we run against them."

Maccaw eyed the speaker as if doubting what he said—doubted if he had ever encountered even one knight of the trail, but he refrained from expressing his opinion.

On bowed the stage, with increased speed, if anything, and the shades of night became deeper and darker.

The moon would not come up, until at least eight o'clock—that is, so its light would strike upon the wagon-trail; and, in the mean time, the pine-covered peaks added somberness to the nightfall, making it so dark within the coach that it was difficult to distinguish one's hand before his face.

The conversation ceased, entirely, and no voice was heard but that of Jehu, who occasionally cursed the fore-right-wheeler, for not holding his own.

Four of the six passengers within the coach had not uttered a word since it had started for Lightning Lode, although on one or two occasions the negro had given vent to a guffaw at some of the giant's quaint expressions.

At last Luna showed her face over the range of foothills that bordered the abyss on the eastern side, and her effulgent light so invaded the coach as to light up the interior.

Then, became apparent, something that was very significant, to say the least, to one person in the coach, and that was Mambrinus Maccaw.

Aimed at him from the several parts of the coach were eight revolvers. Every man except the negro held one or more, and the "he-up-an'-haw," was the target.

Garrick held two magnificent weapons—different ones from those he had before exhibited.

"Mr. Mambrinus Maccaw," he said, "you were saying something about road-agents, predicting that one or more of the gents would halt the stage before our arrival at Lightning Lode."

"Great jigs of St. Vitus!—reckon I did make an allowance ter thet effect, but durn my ducats ef I meant ter offend ary one," the giant protested, evidently in much alarm.

"We have sized you up to a fraction," explained Garrick. "You are a nicely-proportioned decoy duck, but we have caught you on dry land, this time!"

"Decoy duck—me?" Maccaw echoed, in astonishment.

"Just so!" was the response. "It's a nice little game, but is worn rather threadbare. You belong to some band of cut-throats whose aim it is to stop this coach, providing it is worth their while. You were put on here to size up the passengers, and communicate with the driver whether to stop the stage or not at some convenient point of attack. Oh! you see we understand it all, and we are going to frustrate your pretty scheme, you bet! You utter a word to the driver before we get to Lightning Lode and you are a dead man!"

"Great terpsichorean feet uv old St. Vitus," gasped the bullwhacker. "Yer dead wrong—dead, dead wrong. I ain't no decoy, no more'n you aire. I'm an honest, law-abidin' citizen o' ther town o' Lightning Lode, an' I kin prove et!"

"Oh! as for that, you shall have an opportunity to do so," Garrick assured, with a cynical smile; "and you shall have an opportunity to stretch hemp, as well. For the present, however, you are my prisoner, and must submit to be searched."

"Cuss ye!" the bullwhacker growled, "I tell ye I'm on the squar', an' won't stand this monkey bizness. I'm on ther squar', I am, an' et's you who aire up to crooked bizness!"

Garrick laughed coolly.

"That is where you are mistaken," he retorted. "I am well known to one of the foremost citizens of Lightning Lode. You cannot play off any of your innocence on me; so empty the contents of your pockets into this hat, or I'll have you riddled with bullets. If it is proven that you are an honest fellow, when we reach our destination, everything shall be returned to you intact."

"Oh, well, then, thet makes a difference," the giant declared. "I'm thet sure thet ev'ry citizen o' the Lode wull sw'ar by this hyar he-up-an'-haw, thet I'd gamble a fortune on it. So ef them's the conditions thet I get me personal effects back, when I'm proved on ther squar', I don't mind comin' to yer terms."

"You can rely upon my word as a 'man of honor that it shall so be," Garrick replied.

Without further parley Maccaw went through his pockets and deposited their contents in Garrick's hat.

There were a few dollars in gold and silver—not over twenty at the most—a jackknife, a package of something wrapped in blue paper, which looked as if it might contain a number of bank-notes, and a sealed but undirected envelope.

These articles Gilbert Garrick transferred from the hat to his own pocket, and then demanded and received the giant's weapons.

On rolled the stage more slowly, as it toiled up a steep part of the trail. Inside, a grim silence was maintained until—

Suddenly the ringing challenge of "Halt! there!" resounded distinctly through the night, and the "hearse" promptly came to a standstill.

"Road-agents!" Gilbert Garrick announced, as he peered from the window.

CHAPTER II.

LIGHTNING LODE.

LIGHTNING LODE!

An odd name for a town, or more appropriately, a mining-camp, yet not stranger than the place, and its rugged, ever-toiling people.

Situated in a deep pass or rift between two stupendous walls of towering mountain, the camp nestled at the pass terminus, in the face of another stupendous wall, being thus locked on three sides.

The gulch was not over a quarter-mile in width, where the town had been built, while its environment of rock battlements, towered seemingly to the skies.

The only outlet or inlet to the place, was by

the way of the pass, which ran due southwestward, from the point of its sudden termination.

Here lay Lightning Lode camp, which never was kissed with sunlight, save when Old Sol lingered his limited time in the neighborhood of zenith.

Half a hundred rude habitations had already been built, and there were plenty of indications lying around loose that more would be erected, ere the snows of winter fell.

Lightning Lode proper, had no mining-claims in it—indeed, gold in paying quantities had not been found in any part of the gulch or mountain rift; but, a thousand feet up the precipitous mountain-side, above the camp, was one of the richest quartz lodes in that particular section of the Territory.

Months previous to our story, and before the little town had its inception, a hunter was belated one night upon the mountain—a wild, windy, rain-drenched night, when the lightning's play made pyrotechnical phenomena most weirdly beautiful, and awe-inspiring, and the thunder's roar jarred the very earth. The hunter sought shelter in a small cave, which he had discovered, in the earlier part of the day.

Here he remained, alone and lonely, an awed spectator of the nocturnal warring of the elements, until—

other discovery that filled him with an entirely different phase of surprise.

The eruption had not only cast about him rocks, but gold!

It was all around him, in flakes, dust and nuggets.

Also had the shock exposed plainly to view, a huge vein of gold, which appeared to run far back into the mountains, and was of sufficient size to suggest the existence of a thousand fortunes, at the very least—a sight that would have set many a Croesus man wild with delight—a gift of the Divine One's wondrous hand.

The hunter was a veteran rover of the wilderness, and this strange fortune so bewildered him that for days he was little better than a lunatic, and kept closely near his prize, but at length began to deliberate calmly over the situation.

He was a poor man, and although a princely fortune, was within his grasp, he, alone and unaided, was powerless to develop it.

Several days were spent in forming plans; then, taking his bearings, he struck out for the haunts of civilization. Reaching an important far Western City, he hunted up a man, well-to-do in this world's goods, who had been a school chum, in bygone days.

man, despite the fact that he had received an excellent education in his youth.

Therefore, Norris took the "push" of the enterprise upon his own shoulders, making Marten but little more than a silent partner.

Owing to the extreme elevation of the lode, it became necessary to provide a way of getting the ore down into the gulch, which furnished the only desirable site for a crusher and necessary buildings.

Careful figuring proved that the only practicable method, and at the same time the cheapest, was to construct a "cableway," and this was done, at the cost of many thousands of dollars.

Starting from the mine, a wire cable of sufficient size and strength was stretched across, and back over the gulch from one wall to the other, on a slight decline, until it eventually reached the gulch bottom, and entered a breaker, or ore-mill, where the gold was separated from the rock.

This aerial track was constructed on the principle embodied in the subjoined rude sketch, and was but one of many to be found in the mining regions of the far West.

Hung to this transit cable on pulleys, and controlled in ascent and descent by engine power, at the mine, a train of iron buckets and riders, furnished the means of transport for the ore, which was converted, practically, into riches, at the lower terminus of the line.

This piece of civil engineering completed and the camp fairly started as a "city," the work of developing the mine became but a matter of quick time, the result proving more and more gratifying, daily.

Thus, within three months after the discovery of the mine, Lightning Lode was an assured success, and grew rapidly, stage loads of people arriving daily.

Some of these came to stay; others, who could find no means of subsistence, or employment, departed.

Two months after the town was fairly under way, Melvin Marten died, under very suspicious circumstances; was found dead in his bed, stabbed through the heart, with a dagger, whose hilt was set with rare diamonds.

The weapon was sticking in his heart when his corpse was discovered.

No one in all the town of Lightning Lode acknowledged ever having seen the weapon before; so nothing could be proven, although there were those who believed that Nicholas Norris, on his dying bed, might be able to throw some light on the matter.

Marten was buried, and Norris produced a will, by which document all the mine and deceased's other wealth, descended to him, Norris.

Of course this created much comment, but Marten's antecedents being little known, so far as Lightning Lode was concerned, the matter soon ceased to be thought of, and Nick Norris came to be regarded as the hunter's rightful heir.

He was not stingy with his money, and as his mine gave employment to six-eighths of the regular inhabitants, they could not very well "sneal," no matter what their private opinions might be.

Thus things ran along, until a few weeks before the opening date of our story.

Then, something occurred that materially changed the aspect of circumstances.

A matronly but still handsome lady, attired in black, aged about thirty-seven, and a still more beautiful maiden of seventeen—a gloriously-pretty embodiment of budding womanhood—also attired in black, one day dropped down into Lightning Lode, bag and baggage.

The elder lady immediately visited Nicholas Norris, and announced herself as the relict of Melvin Marten, and the young lady as his and her daughter.

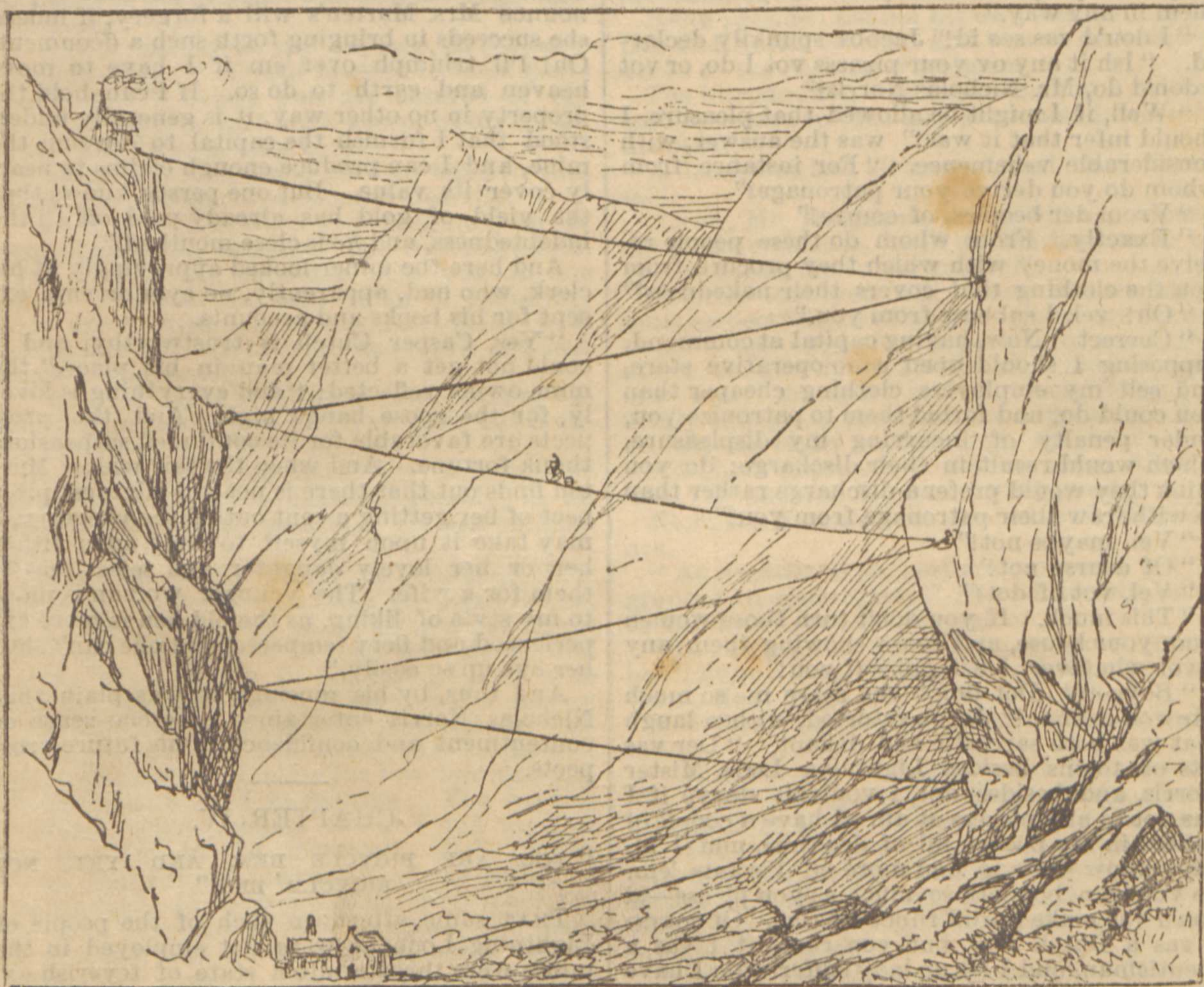
On his disputing her right to that title she had produced marriage and birth certificates, and laid claim to the property.

He had disputed this right, and, in evidence, produced the will of Melvin Marten, the dating of which was at least a month prior to Marten's death.

Upon learning this Mrs. Marten had declared her ability, to produce a will, drawn, in her favor, at a date two weeks later than that held by Norris, and also written by the same lawyer, who had written the will held by Norris.

Also, that she held the originals of the entry documents which made the Lightning Lode Melvin Marten's property.

Norris had denied this, denounced her as an adventuress and an impostor, and had defied her to substantiate her claims.



Something occurred that changed the whole course of his fate, and future.

The night was barely half-spent when there was a fearful thunder-clap and glare of lightning and it seemed to the hunter that an earthquake had shaken the mountains—at any rate, he became insensible, and, for hours knew no more.

When he returned to consciousness, all was changed.

Previous to the clap of thunder and the lightning flash, which had rendered him insensible, there had stood upon the mountain side, just without the cave, a tall pine tree—a noble specimen of its species; but now, when the hunter awoke, the pine was shattered from its top down to near its roots.

Lightning had done the work most effectually.

But, this was not all!

Within the cave a most singular transformation had taken place, for the lightning had penetrated the cave, and played havoc with its rocky walls. All around the hunter lay the debris of stone and dirt, and the cave was wonderfully enlarged. Seams and strange fissures prevailed on every hand, and huge jagged boulders now lay strewn about.

Yet the hunter had not received bodily injury, beyond a few insignificant bruises.

Phenomenal and astonishing though this all was, to the man, day's full light brought an-

To him he told of his discovery, and requested assistance, and it was given.

With the aid thus obtained, the hunter applied to the proper Government authorities, and received such documents as made him the owner of his discovery.

Overwhelmed with joy, he went back to his claim, accompanied by a Government official and his boyhood's friend, and the Lightning Lode was viewed, and all details attended to, relative to making the discoverer the sole and undisputed owner.

Being without the means necessary to develop the mine, his friend tendered all the assistance in his power, on the strength of a certain agreement between them, and the result was the inception of the town and mine, known as Lightning Lode, and its creation and development.

The camp was started with a few habitations, and grew. The mine was supplied with the best facilities for working it, and as the news of the "locate" went forth, a horde of fortune-seekers swarmed to the new diggings, and as a natural consequence, the camp expanded, as only Western mining-camps can.

The hunter's name was Melvin Marten, and that of his abettor and friend was Nicholas Norris.

Norris was a business man, in the fullest sense of the word, while, as for Marten, long years of roaming in the wilds, had largely detracted from his capabilities as a thorough business

The people of Lightning Lode got hold of the matter, and opinion was divided as to which was in the right.

In the mean time, Mrs. Marten and her beautiful daughter, Myra, were in destitute circumstances, having exhausted nearly all of their means in coming to Lightning Lode, and having no other immediate method of earning a livelihood, had accepted accommodations in the home of a Jew, who had settled in the camp, and entered into the clothing business, and Myra occupied a position of saleswoman for the store—as the ready-witted Jew foresaw that her beauty would attract him custom—while her mother took in washing to do, from the miners, who were, fortunately, not blessed with families.

And this brief explanation, brings us up to the day of the night, on which we have witnessed the stopping of the stage.

CHAPTER III.

NORRIS AND THE JEW.

It was a bright day overhead, and the people of Lightning Lode felt joyful, when about noon-day the sun sent down a flood of light into the gulch, as if desirous of "warming up" things.

Far up the mountain-side, the occasional report of an explosion was heard; the train of ore-filled buckets glided regularly and gracefully down the cable way; the peculiar noisy sound of the crusher at the mill sent forth its token of activity, enlivened with the shriek of a whistle now and then from the engine up at the mine, announcing the starting of a bucket-train; while down in the rugged gulch street a few people loitered—for the day had no such sights and sounds for the camp, as did the night, when the men who toiled by day were alive for carousal and sport, after darkness had thrown its mantle over the town.

Such resorts as the Snortin' Snake Hotel, and Red Ryan's Roaring Rams poker-room, were lively enough at night, but during the day little or no business was expected or done, except what was derived from the coming-and-going floating population.

Among the most conspicuous structures in the camp was the combined dwelling and office of Nicholas Norris, recently built and furnished.

The house was elegantly fitted up, with furnishings that came for many a mile; while the office was a model of convenience, in the way of desks, safe and easy-chairs.

About noon of the day of which we write, the mine proprietor was seated in his office, tipped back, and evidently enjoying a fragrant cigar, while he lazily watched the people who passed by the open door. At a desk, a plainly-dressed consumptive-appearing young man toiled at the books; but the mine-owner paid no attention to him.

Norris was sparely built, with a hard-set, un-bearded face, that was not guilty of much merciful or refined expression; cold gray eyes, and hair as white as snow, although he was not over five and-fifty years of age.

He was such a person, as one would hardly have confidence to approach, if in quest of a favor, and there was something in his features which seemed to suggest that his average peace of mind was not of the most agreeable nature.

He dressed plainly, and wore neither jewelry nor collar, and one would scarcely have taken him for the rich man he was, by his appearance.

But this was only a daytime inventory of him. At night, when Lightning Lode was lively, he was altogether a different sort of human being. He went forth among the people, and spent his money freely, gambled, drank, and associated with one and all of his employees alike.

In doing this, he may have had a mercenary object—at least, there were a few who quietly thought so.

The expression of his countenance, as he sat in his office to-day, indicated that he was expecting some one—who presently put in an appearance.

He was the German Jew clothing merchant of the town—a large, rather obese individual, with a good-natured face, immensely at contrast with that of the typical Jew whom we so often take as an example of the Hebrew race. He wore no beard, and his face was expressive of intelligence.

"Goot mornin', Mr. Norris!" he said, as his corpulent proportions filled the doorway. "You vas send for me?"

"Yes, Jacobs; I want to have a chat with you," the mine-owner replied, motioning him to a chair. "Have a cigar."

"No, Mister Norris, I neffer smokes. You vant some clot'ing, I dinks?"

"Well, no, Jacobs, but I shall, I presume, quite soon. I sent for you to see you about an entirely different matter—about the women you have under your roof."

"Der ladies, you mean?" Jacobs returned, with a sparkle of displeasure in his eyes.

"Oh! well, yes, if you want it that way!" and Norris smiled, cynically.

"You can pet your life dey vas ladies, yust de same!" the clothing merchant asserted. "I know dot you vas dryin' to make light mit deir character since you vinde oud who dey vas, but, py tam, dey vas perfect ladies, und you bet Isaac Jacobs vas deir frient!"

Norris's face manifested the displeasure he felt at the declaration.

"Oh! I am aware that you are a friend to them, but you will eventually find out that you are harboring two impostors, who will do you more harm than good. Of course the girl is an attraction behind your counter, in one sense—in another she is not. Like the woman who claims to be her mother, she will rob you, as the old woman is trying to swindle me!"

"Dot vas all right. Vot she steal from me she deserves for her faithful attention!" Jacobs replied, dryly.

"Allowing that, it will be an injury to you to keep these people beneath your roof, or befriend them in any way."

"I don'd vas see id!" Jacobs spunkily declared. "Ish it any ov your pizness vot I do, or vot I don'd do, Mr. Nicholas Norris?"

"Well, if I might be allowed that pleasure, I should infer that it was!" was the answer, with considerable vehemence. "For instance, from whom do you derive your patronage?"

"Vrom der beoples, of course!"

"Exactly. From whom do these people receive the money with which they procure from you the clothing that covers their nakedness?"

"Oh! vel, I subbose from you."

"Correct. Now, having capital at command, supposing I should open a co-operative store, and sell my employees clothing cheaper than you could do, and forbid them to patronize you, under penalty of incurring my displeasure, which would result in their discharge; do you think they would prefer a discharge rather than to withdraw their patronage from you?"

"Vel, maybe not!"

"Of course not!"

"Vel, vot of dot?"

"This much. If you don't turn those women from your house, and cease showing them any favor whatever, I will boycott you!"

"Boycott? Dot don't vas scare me so much like von cannon!" Jacob retorted, with a laugh that was both sarcastic and defiant. "Der vas lots of towns besides Lightning Lode, Mister Norris, and besides dot, I wouldn't starve if I vas not in any pizness at all. I have a couple of dollars in my pocket all of der time, und I always know vere to find more off I wants 'em. So you can boycott so much as you please—id don'd vas make no diff'rance mit me. Of course I vas a Dutch Jew, but you can bet I vas a shentleman, und I let no lady suffer w'ile I have von dollar! Ish dot all?"

So coolly and sarcastically had the merchant delivered the speech, that, by the time he was done, Norris's face betrayed the rage that was fairly consuming him.

"You are a fool, and you shall find that I am as good as my word," he cried, smiting the table near him with his hand. "If you choose to befriend those two adventuresses, I will make Lightning Lode so hot for you that you will be glad to catch the first stage. I swear it!"

"Oh! don'd you vas swear!" Jacobs deprecated, good-naturedly, as he arose. "Dot vas vot all bad beoples do. Ash vor making id comvortable vor me, Misder Norris"—and here the fellow arose, and drew himself erect—"vy I vas chilly now and would not mind taking soome eggsercise righd away off quick!"

The Jew was inventoried by the people of the camp as being a pretty hard man to get away with, having come out the victor in several "skewrups;" and, therefore Nick Norris shrunk away at the challenge.

"You'd better not lay a hand on me!" he growled, "and as for harboring those women, unless you stop it at once you'll find I'll adopt harsher measures toward you than simple boycotting!"

"All right—dot vas all right, Mister Norris. Yuste you go ahead righd away off quick, und see vot you make out of id. You haff enemies as well as friends in Lightning Lode, and py tam, der ish one person who is not afraid to shoot you!"

"Who is that?"

"Der Vailed Lady—Kid Glove Kate!"

The mine-owner looked startled.

"She is not my enemy!" he declared.

"You bet she is. She hate you vorse und poison."

"How do you know? The woman, or man, whichever it may be, has no cause to hate me!"

"Dot makes no tiff'rance. She no like you at all, und vone off dese time you find it out!"

Then, with a quiet laugh, the clothing merchant left the office.

The face of Nicholas Norris assumed an expression of rage after his visitor's departure.

"Curse the Jew!" he mused, "he is as stubborn as the devil's doctor, and evidently intends to befriend the two women all he can, and thus baffle my plans. But I will show him that two can play at a game. And this Kid Glove Kate—what has she against me, if indeed it is a woman, which I have sometimes had my doubts about? I have played cards with her and drank with her, but have never had an intimation that she regarded me in any sterner light than she does others with whom she associates. If there is any truth in Jacob's assertion, I shall have to investigate, and be on my guard; and if things work right, I'll defy all the law in the territory to break my claim upon the Lightning Lode. Barras, the lawyer, is dead, and thus there is a chance for me to pronounce Mrs. Marten's will a forgery, if indeed she succeeds in bringing forth such a document. Oh! I'll triumph over 'em if I have to move heaven and earth to do so. If I can hold the property in no other way, it is generally understood that I furnish the capital to develop the mine, and I can produce enough claims to nearly cover its value. But one person knows that the yield of gold has already paid off all the indebtedness, and he is close-mouthed!"

And here the miner looked approvingly at his clerk, who had, apparently, no eyes or ears except for his books and accounts.

"Yes, Casper Cutch is trustworthy, and I could not get a better man in his place," the mine-owner reflected; "and everything is lovely, for the goose hangs high. And the prospects are favorable for its continued suspension, thank fortune. And when the fair widow Marten finds out that there is not the slightest prospect of her getting a cent out of the property, I may take it upon myself to wait upon either her or her lovely daughter, and select one of them for a wife. The younger woman is more to my style of liking, as the old hen is more experienced and fiery tempered, and one can't shut her eye up so easily."

And thus, by his musings, it was plain that Nicholas Norris entertained a serene sense of contentment and confidence in his future prospects.

CHAPTER IV.

"YOU ARE BICYCLE BEN, AND YET, NOT BICYCLE BEN."

THAT same afternoon such of the people of Lightning Lode as were not employed in the mines were thrown into a state of feverish excitement over a sight most strange and novel for that out-of-the-way place.

A full-fledged circus or train of railway cars could scarcely have created more curiosity than did the spectacle presented to the gaze of the few people who were upon the street.

Coming up the gulch-trail into the camp was a man mounted upon one of those high, two-wheeled machines, known as the bicycle—a magnificent specimen of its kind, full nickel-plated, with ball bearings, lantern, and all the latest improvements.

Few if indeed any persons in all the camp had ever seen one of the things, and to the small crowd who quickly assembled to greet the newcomer, the idea of a man riding complacently along astride two wheels was both wonderful and ludicrous.

"The divil's coomin', shure!" one Irishman piously ejaculated, while the others were hardly prepared to express their views, but regarded the approaching wheelman with increased curiosity.

As he drew nearer, it was seen that the rider of the nickel-plated steed was young in years and handsome. He possessed a graceful yet muscular figure, which was clad in a gay, well-fitting wheelman's suit, including knee pants and red stockings, and a red skull-cap with tassel.

He wore his hair long, down over his broad shoulders, and a gracefully trained mustache ornamented his lip. His eyes were brazen, and keen of glance, while his countenance, as a

whole, was attractive, and denoted intelligence and decision of character.

He raised his cap, gracefully, with one hand, as he sped toward the group of men who had collected in the street, and rode easily down among them, smiling at their manifest surprise.

"Good-afternoon, gents!" he saluted pleasantly, as he leaped from his wheel, and crossed his arm over the lever. "Might I inquire if this is the camp called Lightning Lode?"

"This aint ther city o' Lightning Lode!" a miner ventured to respond, with dignity.

"Ah! yes, so I observe," the bicyclist replied, "for you have the requisite number of saloons. Pardon me for not noticing the fact, at first glance. And now, may I ask another question, before I lean my burro up against a tree to graze? Does there exist anywhere around these parts a band of footpads headed by a man called El Creole?"

"There does exist such a party," and Nicholas Norris stepped forward. "His gang is the terror of all honest people, and frequently stop the stages on the trail to Lightning Lode. Who are you, and what do you want of El Creole?"

The question was so pointed that the bicyclist gave the mine-owner a second searching glance.

"Well, sir," he answered, "you can call me Bicycle Ben, and set me down as having come to this country to hunt for this El Creole, and to kill him. However, let that be explanation enough, for the present; and now let us go take something?"

"But, it must be at my expense, sir!" Norris said gallantly. "If your mission to these parts is to go for El Creole you are assured of my heartiest support, and must accept of my hospitality, during your stay here!"

Bicycle Ben then found his own hand in that of the mine-owner, who shook it heartily.

"I am both surprised and delighted, sir, at your unexpected welcome," the wheelman said, "but I must beg to differ with you on one point. You and the other men of Lightning Lode drink with me, to day. I'll drink with you to-morrow. Where do they spill the best spirits hereabouts?"

"At Red Ryan's!" Norris said, linking the sport's arm in his own. "Ryan deals out nothing but what is A 1!"

So, to the "Roaring Ram" they betook their way, the mine-owner chatting volubly, in an evident attempt to entertain his self-claimed guest.

"I'm glad you've come!" he protested, "for this camp wants a wide-awake, go-ahead fellow, as I take you to be, to make this El Creole hunt his den. He is a very dare-devil, and there's not a person in Lightning Lode who does not fear him. He's robbed me of money frequently, through tapping the stages, and although I am rich and better able to stand it than some others, it none the less incenses me. By the way, a word to the wise: You see this clothing shebang, where the girl and the Jew are standing in the doorway? Well, if you value your life, or the respect of the people of Lightning Lode, keep shy of it. For, while the girl has none too savory a repute, the place is 'crooked,' and a watch is constantly kept to entrap the unwary. There's been more than one dark deed done in there, the latest being the drugging and robbing of an Easterner, who came here for speculative purposes. He was found, a mile out of town, in an insensible condition, and, although nothing could be proven, it is morally certain that the Jew and the girl were concerned in the outrage. So, again, I'd advise you to steer clear of the den, as there are lurking secrets within it of which none know except those immediately concerned."

Bicycle Ben inclined his head as acknowledgment that he heard, and as he passed the clothing store of Isaac Jacobs, he gave both the Jew and his beautiful girl-clerk, a sharp, searching scrutiny.

As they returned the stare he averted his gaze, as he and the mine-owner sauntered on, followed by the crowd, who were perfectly willing to wet their thirsty whistles at any one's expense.

"Did you see 'em eye you?" Nicholas Norris asked, nudging the wheelman. "Oul they're fly at sizing up a person, you can bet, and will, no doubt, lay a trap to ensnare you."

"I'm not one of the kind of fish to be easily snared!" Bicycle Ben replied, quietly. "I make it a point to keep an eye out for Number One at all times."

He did not mention what opinion he had formed of the people at the clothing house, but, in truth, it did not coincide with that which Norris had tried hard to have him entertain.

"If that girl isn't an angel of purity and honesty, I'm a very badly deceived person!" had been his mental estimate, "and I rather liked the beaming face of the Dutchman. So, I shall keep my own counsel, mine host, and find out what cause you have for maligning these people!"

By this time they had reached the "Roaring Ram," kept by the redoubtable and famous sporting character of the camp, "Red" Ryan.

Ryan had the reputation of being one of the most scientific fighting men in the mountains, not alone with knuckles, at which he was best, but with almost any other weapon.

The failure of the church had given him an opportunity to start a bar and poker-room, and he had the reputation of "dealing a square game," and of being "square" in other matters, a virtue not often accredited to a professional gambler.

To be sure, he had shot and killed an unruly tough, on his "opening" night, but that only proved that he intended to run the shebang!

A tall, powerfully built fellow, he had a round, pleasant face, and dark eyes, hair, and mustache—and, better than all, always had a pleasant word for everybody, when not involved in a quarrel.

He derived his title of "Red" not alone from the fact that he claimed Redmond as his "fore" name, but also because it was a pet hobby of his to wear a pair of corduroy breeches, of the veriest red color.

Ryan presided behind his own bar, as Bicycle Ben and Norris entered, and was at once introduced to the dashing wheelman.

The introduction was but formal, and neither man appeared to take any particular interest in the other.

A drink was had all around, and then Norris said:

"Now, Mr. Benjamin, if you will accompany me to my residence, I will do the hospitable by you, so far as lies in my power!"

"I pray that you will excuse me, sir, but I must respectfully decline your generous invitation. I am expecting a party, in town, this afternoon, and unless I keep out of doors, I may miss him!" the sport replied, respectfully but firmly enough to preclude the supposition that he could be easily moved from the resolve his words had expressed. "Some other time, I shall feel honored to become your guest."

Nicholas Norris's face flushed with displeasure.

"At another time, perhaps you will not be granted an opportunity!" he said, tersely, as he turned away, and left the saloon.

"It won't cause gray hairs to grow in my head, at any rate!" Bicycle Ben flung after him, with a light laugh.

Red Ryan heard the remark, and shook his head.

"Nick Norris ain't a good man to have dislike you!" he observed, setting out the glasses as indicating that it was his treat. "You know he owns this camp, purty much, and likes to be humored and petted, like a spoiled child, or else he's as mad as a boiled hornet. So, if I were you, I'd go and apologize to him for not accepting his invitation!"

Bicycle looked the astonishment he felt.

"What! I apologize to him for nothing?" he ejaculated. "Why, what d'ye take me for?"

"For a man who don't understand his biz!" Ryan politely declared—"of course, not insinuating but what you're as cute as they make 'em—of course not! But, you see, it pays to go it easy occasionally. Now, if I had not been a chap of a forgiving spirit, I'd have killed the old cuss long ago—and lost his custom. Why, he's paid for this place already. See?"

"I comprehend, sir; but as I have no place to pay for, there's a vast difference. The man is no more entitled to an apology from me because he is rich, than though he were as poor as a rat—nor is he any more likely to get it, if as much. He pushed his hospitality upon me, and I felt inclined not to accept it. So that's all there is of it."

"Maybe—I hope so. But, although I'm no lawyer, I've found that a rich friend is better than a rich enemy, 'most any time."

"I am not prepared to doubt that; but as I owe Mr. Norris no apology, I certainly shall not give him one."

And the flash of the wheelman's eyes spoke more forcibly than his words that he meant what he said.

"Well, we won't quarrel about it," Red Ryan said: "but let's take a smile. While I admire your principle, I doubt if you will profit by adhering to it."

They drank again, and then Bicycle Ben left the Roaring Ram.

As he did so he encountered a veiled woman in front of the door who, immediately upon seeing him, uttered an exclamation, and laid her hand upon his shoulder.

"You are Bicycle Ben?" she said, interrogatively.

"Yes!" he replied, staring hard at her, and noting that there were hemmed apertures through her veil for her to see and breathe through.

"You are Bicycle Ben, and yet you are not Bicycle Ben!" she said. "I know you, you see. And you are the very individual I want to see!"

And this woman was Kid Glove Kate.

CHAPTER V.

EL CREOLE "ORDERS UP!"

LET us return to the halted stage, upon the mountain trail, despite the fact that as regards time, we are preceding ourselves, in the thread of our story.

No challenge could have been more promptly answered than the suddenness with which the Jehu brought the stage to a standstill, on demand.

Almost instantly, thereafter, the doors of the coach were thrown open, on either side, and a dozen men were seen each clutching one or more leveled revolvers, showing that there was little use for the passengers to attempt resistance.

Every man was masked, and dressed in top-boots, corduroy trousers, red shirts, and slouch hats.

"Gentlemen!" cried one of the foremost, "I am El Creole, the road-agent, and I have held up this stage so that one of your number might have an opportunity to turn the contents of his pockets into my hat. Ye'r a poor moneyless set, whom I'd despise robbing, with the exception of this one man, and his name is Gilbert Garrick! He has money, jewelry and other valuables, and if he will be so kind and accommodating, I will take them, and keep good care of them, for him!"

"Curse you! you shall not have them!" Garrick cried, furiously. "I'll—I'll—"

"Do nothing!" triumphantly answered the road-agent. "None of your kicking, Gil Garrick, or I'll have the boys take you out o' there, and riddle ye wi' bullets. So pitch everything out here on the ground, or die. You can take your choice. *Everything*, now mind you!"

"Hyer, give me back my things!" gasped Mambrinus Maccaw, excitedly. "The road-agents doan't want 'em so give 'em back to me!"

"To Halifax with you!" Garrick roared.

"That blind won't work, but you can bet we'll fix you when we get you to Lightning Lode. Here, you accursed robber—take all, but by the furies of Hades, remember, I'll hunt you down, and have life's blood for this outrage!" and emptying his pockets he tossed one thing after another upon the ground—among the rest the things he had obtained from the giant.

A groan escaped Maccaw, as he saw them go beyond his reach—probably irredeemably—but he could not prevent the sacrifice, as one of the road-agents' revolvers was leveled uncomfortably near his head.

Through the eye-holes of his mask, El Creole watched Garrick empty his pockets—then, when the process was completed, he cried:—

"There! Thank you, Garrick! I see you appreciate how much sweeter is life than lucre—which is wise of you, for I should most certainly have salivated you had you not come down according to directions. By the way, if you're dry and want a drink, when you get to Lightning Lode, drop into any bar an' tell 'em El Creole ordered 'em up for you, and they won't dare refuse you. If they do, just report to me and I'll come down and clean the town out, you can bet! That's all! Much obliged to you, I'm sure! Perhaps we'll meet again when you're flush!"

The doors of the coach were then slammed shut, and the driver ordered to "get a-going," which he did, without hesitation.

And the stage rumbled away toward Lightning Lode, leaving El Creole and his band behind, with their ill-gotten booty; while within the receding coach, Gilbert Garrick sat among his fellow-passengers, and cursed, furiously.

"You're all an accursed set of idiots—idiots and traitors, an' I'll have ye all strung up when we get to the camp. Why didn't ye shoot, curse ye!"

"Thar wasn't no use o' our gittin' peppered!"

one miner agreed, "an' ef ye sling out any more hints about our havin' ter do wi' that attack, we'll take ye out o' this coach, and boost ye ter a limb!"

"You bet we will—great jigs of old St. Vitus, yes!" eagerly assented Maccaw. "Ary gerloot as'll asperse ther character uv a great he-up-an'-haw, like yer 'umble sarvent, orter be burnt on a funeral pyre, higher'n ther Big Buttes o' ther Rockies—I'm a snortin', snappin' snake, ef he hadn't! Tork erbout yer loss, you mealy-mouthed mackerel! Why, ye've no idea what I've lost—more'n I kin ever make, ef I war gittin' a thousand dollars a day in a thousan' years—honor an' resposnibility!"

Garrick uttered a snarling curse, but made no other answer; but when, a half-hour later, the stage broke down, with a wheel off, and the passengers had no choice but to foot it on to Lightning Lode, the negro and Maccaw walked together.

Watching his chance, the darky nudged the giant, as he said:

"Sh! I knows you's all right, boss, but don't it done gone an' strike you dat dar was suffin' 'sterious an' crooked 'bout dat dar stage robbery?"

And although he had been keeping his own counsel it struck Maccaw exactly in that same manner—it did look to him as if there was something decidedly queer about it that he and Garrick should have been the only sufferers by the attack.

What significance, however, was there in the fact?

CHAPTER VI.

KID GLOVE KATE.

THE words of Kid Glove Kate caused Bicycle Ben considerable astonishment, inasmuch as he was a stranger to that part of the territory.

Who or what she could be was more than he could fathom nor had he the least idea, what she could want with him.

"So I am the very person you want to see, am I?" he said in answer to her declaration. "Well, as I don't know that I know you, perhaps you will be kind enough, to explain to me what it is you want of me?"

"Oh! certainly. Just step down here, out of earshot, and I will grant you the information you want."

Just below the Roaring Ram was a vacant lot, and to the edge of this Kid Glove Kate led the way, and halted, facing Bicycle Ben.

"There! Little danger of our being overheard here," she declared, with a keen glance around, "and so we will come to the point, without delay. I hear that you have quarreled with Nicholas Norris!"

"Indeed! How did you acquire the information?" Ben demanded.

"That does not matter. I have ways numerous and various for finding out that which I may desire to know. I have learned that a quarrel or perhaps, more correctly a rupture has occurred between you and the mine-owner!"

"Only so far as he tendered me the hospitality of his home and I declined, whereupon he became offended."

"Precisely. Norris appeared to take it into his bigoted head to take you under the protection of his officious wing?" and there was a spice of sarcasm in Kid Glove Kate's tone.

"Well, I should rather take it in that light!" Ben acknowledged.

"And you are right in doing so. You do not understand Nick Norris, yet, however. By the way, I understand that you came to these parts for the purpose of hunting down the outlaw, El Creole?"

"I did!"

"What for?"

"To kill him!"

Sternly did the sport utter these words, and with an intensity of feeling that could only arise from a vengeful spirit.

"You would commit murder, then?" Kate queried.

"No—I would but be taking a life for a life!" was the grim reply, and Ben's frank countenance became shadowed with gloom.

"Then, you have a vengeance to satisfy?"

"I have!"

"Of what nature?"

"That can matter little, just now. Enough is it, that I am on a trail of vengeance, and that is the one consuming object of my future existence."

"Well, although I know more about you than you suppose, I am ignorant as to your hatred for El Creole. I loathe and despise the man as much as you hate him, and any punishment you can inflict upon him I shall heartily ap-

prove. I wished to tell you this in order that you might not form any unjust suspicions against me, should you have been inclined to do so. Another thing I would speak of: Did Nick Norris speak to you of the girl at the clothing store?"

"He did—and in a manner both uncomplimentary and insulting!"

"I thought as much. He is trying to influence everybody against her and her mother. Listen, and I will briefly outline the cause of his animosity toward them."

She did so. Speaking rapidly and coherently, she related much that is already known to the reader, relative to the affairs of the Marten estate.

Bicycle Ben listened with manifest interest.

"I see why, now!" he said, when she was done. "I see why Nick Norris wishes to blast their reputation, and to crush them. And you say that Mrs. Marten stoutly asserts that she has a will, drawn since that made in favor of Norris?"

"Yes."

"And that she has sent for it?"

"I am not positive; but suspect so. A prominent character about town has been absent for over a week. As he affiliated somewhat with the Martens since they came to Lightning Lode, I have every reason to believe that he was sent after the important documents."

"Likely. His name?"

"He is a rough, uncouth, gigantic bullwhacker, and called himself Mambrinus Maccaw!"

Bicycle Ben started.

"Humph! The name is not unfamiliar to me!" he stated. "Do you know, I once had a dream connected with that name, and I regarded the dream as an omen of evil.* The evil came, sure enough, in the shape of an atrocious murder, and now, it appears that another part of the dream is in prospect of fulfillment. Do you know that this bullwhacker ever had another name?"

"He may easily have had a score of 'em," Kate said, with a laugh. "However, it occurs to me, that I have somewhere heard that he once went by the name of Slumgallion Sloat—tho', for the life of me, I couldn't tell how I got hold of the information."

"It is correct, at any rate," Ben declared. "And this man, you think, was intrusted with the mission of bringing Mrs. Marten's all-important papers to Lightning Lode?"

"Yes."

"Supposing these papers should never reach her?"

"Heavens! I believe the poor woman would become crazy! She puts all her dependence in getting the papers safely here, and proving her rightful ownership to the Lightning Lode."

"Do you think she would be able to do so, even if in possession of the papers?"

"I have not a doubt about the matter. Let me tell you that a large majority of the people of the camp are in deep sympathy with the widow and her daughter, but are constrained not to make the fact evident for fear of angering Norris, upon whom they are dependent for employment!"

"In case the will and deeds should be lost, how about the man who drew them up?"

"Oh! he is dead. A week prior to the widow's arrival in Lightning Lode, a mangled corpse was found, a mile below town. Although it was unrecognizable, as regards face and form, the clothing and some papers in the pockets, were sufficient evidence that the remains were those of Barras, the lawyer. If he were alive, it is generally believed there would be no difficulty in establishing Mrs. Marten's rights."

Bicycle Ben was silent a moment.

"I am considerably interested in this case," he confessed, at length, "and my sympathy naturally goes out for the widow and her daughter."

"And it was mainly to excite your interest in their behalf that I sought this interview with you. I know you to be a man of sterling principles and integrity—bold, brave, fearless and honorable. It is just such a man whom the Martens need to espouse their cause. But they also need a man who is popular with the people—a man who, by some bold, daring or wonderful act, has manifested his pre-eminent superiority over the masses. You, I dare say, would be willing to assist the Martens, and yet it is desirable that you should, in some striking manner, distinguish yourself, and make yourself a favorite among the people!"

* See "Yreka Jim's Joker," HALF-DIME LIBRARY No. 385.

"Oh! that might not be a hard job. But, excuse me, now, if I manifest a little curiosity. You seem much interested in the Martens. Are you personally intimate with them?"

"No—not at all. I have never even spoken to them."

"Then why this interest?"

"The interest of a worldly-pushed person toward those in trouble!"

"Your name?"

"I am called Kid Glove Kate here!"

"Your occupation?"

"I have none."

"Who are you that you claim to know me?"

"That does not matter, sir. I might be the wife of El Creole, for what you know. But ask no more questions on that subject, as I can give you no satisfaction. Enough is it, that I am not your enemy. And now, will you befriend the Martens? You will lose nothing, and it may be the means of your finding El Creole!"

She said this so significantly that he regarded her, keenly.

"May be you are El Creole!" he suggested, grimly.

Whereupon, she laughed.

"I hardly fancy if I were he, and knowing your intentions toward me, I would face you, so amicably. But, time flies. How do you propose to distinguish yourself?"

Bicycle Ben was silent a few moments, before answering. He seemed to be deliberating—searching for some novel plan of action.

Finally, his face brightened, and he said:

"I'll tell you what I am going to do, and I reckon it will catch 'em wild. At dusk, to-night I'm going to mount my bicycle, and ride up that inclined cable road, into the Lightning Lode mine, and back again!"

CHAPTER VII.

A VILLAINOUS SCHEME.

THE extraordinary proposition of Bicycle Ben, caused Kid Glove Kate to utter an ejaculation of astonishment.

"Why, man, are you mad? Such an attempt would but result in your sudden destruction."

"Quite the contrary, Mam'selle Kate. Nothing is impossible, in this age. I can go up that cable, as well as I can ride my cycle upon level ground. It is only a matter of balance, and I am somewhat of an equilibrist, myself. I of course do not ascend with my machine in its present condition, but have a grooved gum band, which I adjust over the present tire, and which prevents the wheel from slipping. Thus, by steady balancing, I can run the machine over a half-inch rope, if it be sufficiently taut."

"But, sir, just think of the fearful peril you would be placing yourself in! The mouth of the mine is at least a thousand feet above the town. Supposing, when part away up, you should lose your balance and come plunging headlong down? Ugh! it is horrible to contemplate. You must not think of attempting it, sir!"

"Well, then, to please you I won't think about it, but will see you, later."

"Stop! I understand you. You say you won't think about it, but you intend to do it!"

"Most assuredly I do!"

"You shall not! It is madness! I will appeal to the people to prevent you!"

"Do so if you choose—there will only be a general demand for an undertaker's services if you do so. So have no fears for my welfare, but watch me paralyze the natives!" and tipping his hat, the dashing wheelman walked away.

Watching him a few seconds, Kid Glove Kate shook her head, as if she doubted his ability to perform what he had promised; then she entered the Roaring Ram.

As for Bicycle Ben, he sauntered leisurely down the street, enjoying a cigar, until he came to the office of Nicholas Norris, whom he saw sitting inside, looking in a very disturbed frame of mind.

Seized by a sudden impulse, the bicyclist entered the office.

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Norris!" he saluted, helping himself to a chair. "Dreaming the hours away, eh?"

"Yes!" was the terse answer. "What of it?"

"Oh! nothing—only you looked so sober and thoughtful. By the way, I just dropped in to say that I have reconsidered somewhat, and concluded to accept of your hospitality during my stay, as inquiry results in my learning you to be a most estimable gentleman. That is, I shall deem it an honor to become your guest, upon one condition!"

There was a disagreeable sneer upon the mine-owner's face as he listened.

"Upon conditions, eh?" he repeated. "Well, allow me to inform you that it is unnecessary to cater for guests by agreeing to conditions. However, go on and explain what you mean!"

"Certainly. I want the privilege of mounting my bicycle, and riding up your cableway, to the mine and back again!"

"What?"

The mine-owner looked thunderstruck.

"I believe I spoke plainly enough, sir. I want the privilege of riding over your cable, on my bicycle, at dusk to-night!"

The astonishment of Nicholas Norris did not seem to abate.

"You're a fool!" he growled. "Don't come bothering me with any such nonsense or I'll have you ejected from my office!"

"By whom?" Ben pleasantly inquired, with an amused glance at Casper Cutch's spindle shanks.

"It don't matter by whom. Don't come here with the impression that I'm a fool!"

"Indeed, I'd sooner take any other man in Lightning Lode to be that, quicker than you. But, that's another thing. You plainly don't believe I can ride up the incline on my bicycle!"

"Certainly I don't! I'd wager my life on it!" and the mine-owner grew flushed and excited.

"Don't you do it!" Ben warned, calmly, "for you would only lose it, and you might not be able to procure another easily. What I want is permission to ride over your cable. Will you grant it?"

"If you are desirous of breaking your neck, yes. I hate to see an idiot lose his life, however!"

"That's all good and well. Perhaps I deserve to be called pet names, for my bravado. But, when you see me accomplish the feat, you will agree that I am not quite as much of a fool as I look, won't you?"

"When I see you accomplish the feat, I will know that you have accomplished it!" was the sarcastic reply, "and I will consider you my guest!"

"Very well. It is with genuine pleasure that I extend you an invitation to be present at the tight-rope performance to-night," and with a gracious bow, he left the office, and was gone.

After his departure, Norris sat for several minutes, with knitted brows and a peculiar expression of countenance.

"I don't know whether I especially desire to cultivate this fellow's acquaintance or not," he muttered. "It is quite plain that he's a sharp of the first water, and his coming back and desiring to accept of my hospitality, has significance in it. He comes here ostensibly to hunt up El Creole. Has he any further mission, I wonder?"

Arising, he put on his hat and left the office, and went direct to the Roaring Ram, where he found Red Ryan and Kid Glove Kate engaged in a game of cards.

As soon as it was finished, he called Ryan one side, out of hearing.

"See here, Ryan, I've always been a good friend to you, haven't I?" he demanded.

"Ever since I know'd you," was the reply.

"And helped you to put yourself on your feet?"

"You have."

"And never came to you and asked you for a favor?"

"Not that I remember of!"

"Very good. And now, if I were to come to you to ask a favor—?"

"I would grant it, providing, of course, I am able to do so."

"Very good. What do you think of this new arrival, who calls himself Bicycle Ben?"

"Very little. I am not particularly impressed."

"You don't fancy him, eh?"

"Hardly! He appears to have been born, a long ways from a salt works."

"You are right. And, to show off some of his smartness, do you know what he proposes to do?"

"No!"

"Well! I'll tell you. He came to me, and wanted permission to ride his bicycle up the cable to the mine!"

"The devil! Why, he will break his neck!"

"So I told him, but he poohed at my warning. You see, he wants to show off before the town, and so gain popularity—for what ulterior object I can only guess."

"And you gave your permission?" Red Ryan inquired.

"Certainly—but, understand, not without an object. I have taken a sudden and positive dislike to the fellow, and I mean that he shall gain no popularity in Lightning Lode. To that end, you must assist me!"

"Well?"

"My plan is this: I have no doubt the fellow has money or else he would not put on so many lugs. So, I propose to test him, and thus: I will publicly offer to bet him that he cannot accomplish the feat. When he is a hundred feet above the town, you are to rush out, and threaten to shoot him if he does not come down. The challenge will lose him his equilibrium, and he will come down!—and you and I will divide the wager money!"

Nick Norris uttered these words fiercely—with a venomous intensity of feeling.

Red Ryan regarded him a moment, half-sterely, half-disgustedly—then, some counter-acting passion seemed to obtain possession of his better man, and he said, rather coldly:

"Very well; I have a private engagement to-night, and cannot personally accommodate you—but, I will instruct my bartender to fill my part."

"Who will tend bar?"

"Kate!"

"What is she to you?" the bonanza king demanded, half-fiercely.

"Nothing!" Red Ryan answered, sententiously, and turning away, rejoined Kid Glove Kate at the card table.

CHAPTER VIII.

BICYCLE BEN MAKES THE TRIP!

AFTER leaving Nicholas Norris, Bicycle Ben wandered about the camp for awhile, and took a good survey of the cable tramway over which he was to take his perilous ride that evening.

It is unnecessary to say the daring sport was full well aware that the experiment would be attended with imminent danger, and perhaps death!

Should he lose his balance, and pitch downward from the rope, it would almost certainly be the latter.

But once the resolution was formed, he was not the man to back out, and shortly before sunset he set to work adjusting the grooved rubber tires to the large and small wheels of his bicycle.

When the operation was complete, he announced his purpose to a number of the bystanders, and this acted as an advertisement, for in a short time every one in Lightning Lode knew of his proposed venture, and, as may be imagined, the excitement waxed warm.

In passing the clothing-house of Isaac Jacobs, it occurred to him that he was in need of some handkerchiefs, and so he improved the opportunity to get another glimpse of Miss Marten.

He found her wrapping up some goods behind the counter, while Jacobs himself was seated outside the counter, reading a paper.

When Myra Marten raised her eyes at the sound of the young wheelman's footsteps, and met his gaze, a faint tinge of color came to her cheek.

"I would like to examine some of your handkerchiefs," Ben said, politely—"something in silk, if you have them."

"Certainly," and Myra took down three boxes, and opened them. "This comprises our stock of silk ones, as they are not in general demand here."

"Yaw, dot ish true!" spoke up Mr. Jacobs. "So helb me gracious! I sells but von handker-sheef since I coom mit Lightning Lode! Ef der folks wants to vipe deir noses off, dey tooks deir shirt-sleeve to it."

Ben laughed.

"You are about right, I guess," he said. "I find it easier to use a handkerchief. There, I think I will take those two, miss."

In the mean time, Jacobs, who ever had an eye out for business, had been regarding Ben's bicycle pants, the legs of which were more abbreviated than ordinary pants.

"Look here, young man; I tole you vot you vant. You haf outgrewed dem pants, und you vant a new pair. I sells you a new pair dirt cheap—der best goods for der least money."

"Not to-day, my friend. These are my bicycle pants, and I wear them when I ride the wheel."

"Oh! den you vas der veller vot ish going to ride up der cable, hey?"

"Exactly."

"Den let me tells you, you pe von fool, so you vas! Vy, you fall off, and preak off your neck."

"Oh, I guess not. If I do, will you give me a black suit to be laid out in?"

"No, but I dole you vot I do. I pet you one whole complete outfit dot you don'd ride up to der mine to-night."

"We will shake!" Ben assented. "I go you the price of two suits that I do."

"All righd; it vas a pargain. Myra, you vas vitness to der agreement."

The girl inclined her head, and regarded Ben rather anxiously.

"Are you not afraid to undertake such a thing?" she asked. "My! I should think it an impossibility for any person to guide a bicycle up that slender cable!"

"Nothing like trying!" Ben bravely responded. "If I win, I win laurels—if I lose, I lose my life. It is a matter of life or death."

"May God guide you right, then?" Myra said, but in a tone that Jacobs could not understand.

Then, after exchanging a few words, Ben took his departure, and it is possible that he left behind him a most anxious heart.

Long before the hour arrived for him to try his remarkable and dangerous experiment, the gulch street was thronged with citizens who were eager to see the attempt made.

Bets were freely offered that Ben could not make good his brag, and there were a few takers, but only a few.

Men who had plenty of money were not anxious to bet that the sport could do that which seemed an impossible feat, while those who were of the opinion that he could accomplish it were those whose cash capital was at low ebb.

A short time before Ben was to make the attempt he encountered Nicolas Norris near the hotel.

There was a contemptuous sneer upon the mine-owner's face—a venomous glitter in his eyes.

"Well, I hear that you are still of a notion to make a show of yourself!" he said, gruffly. "Have you ordered a coffin in advance?—for I'll agree that no one will buy one for you when you break your neck!"

"Don't be too sure about that!" Ben coolly responded. "I've got money enough to defray my funeral expenses in case I stand in need of an outfit, and I'll agree that there might be at least one or two persons in the camp who would lend a hand toward planting me. Besides, sir, I'll have you know that I do not intend to fail in my purpose."

"Oh! don't you?" with another sneer. "Well, now, I'm of the opinion that you will—so much so, at least, that I'd be willing to venture almost any amount of money on the matter!"

"Indeed? Well, I don't know but I'd take you up, providing you wish to make a bona fide bet. How steep do you propose to go?"

"You put up your pile and I'll cover it, two to one, that you can't ride up to the mine and back, over the cable upon your bicycle."

Ben immediately dove into his pockets, and as a result, brought forth two goodly-sized wads of bills that had the appearance of being of large denominations.

"Well, sir, I have here a thousand dollars to bet. But up your money or shut up, whichever you please!"

"Come over here and place your money in the hands of my clerk, Casper Cutch, and I will cover it. If you win you shall have the stakes."

Ben accompanied him to the office and the wager was made in the presence of Cutch, and two others, who were called in as witnesses.

Ben then made his preparations for the attempt.

At his instance a bonfire was built to light up the scene, and then, pushing his bicycle before him, he ascended to a platform, which some miners had volunteered to erect, to enable him to reach the cable whose end was within the ore mill.

Without much difficulty the wheelman succeeded in getting the cycle grooved upon the wire and ready for work.

The next important thing was to get upon it, and at the same time balance it and himself.

Below and all around him people were watching eagerly and anxiously, expecting to see him make a failure, dismal and unfortunate in the extreme; but they reckoned without their host, for once, on in not taking Bicycle Ben for as good as his word.

Steadily balancing the bicycle upon the wire for a few minutes, he suddenly shot upward from the platform with a great spring, and came down astride the machine with as much precision as he could have exercised in sitting upon a chair. In an instant more his feet were upon the treadles, and the bicycle was gliding away up the cable road, toward the mine.

A shout of applause, terrific in its volume, went up from the throats of the spectators, as they realized that, in part, Bicycle Ben had made good his brag.

But another question was yet to be answered. Although he rode steadily and gracefully, from the start, would he be able to continue on, thus, until he reached the mouth of the mine?

The indications were that he would, if allowed to proceed, uninterrupted.

This, however, he was not permitted to do.

All eyes were riveted upon him, when out from the "Roaring Ram" rushed the bartender with a rifle in hand, and uttering a Comanche-like yell.

"Halt! there, Bicycle Ben!" he roared, fiercely. "Come back, or I'll put er bullet through yer cabeza!"

Although, by this time, he was some distance above the town, Bicycle Ben heard the words.

He gradually brought his machine to "a slow" and gazed downward.

"Why shall I halt?" he demanded, sternly.

"Because it is a sin and a shame for a man to thus foolishly peril his life," was the reply. "We all see that you can do what you have claimed, and that is sufficient. I now repeat my order for you to come back or I'll put every bullet in this repeating rifle through your infernal carcass!"

"No you won't!" a second voice cried, and Kid Glove Kate stepped forward, with a pair of cocked "sixes" in her grasp. "Put down your rifle, Jake Grey, and let the bicyclist proceed, or it will be *you* who gets the cold lead. You know me!"

Red Ryan's bartender evidently did know her for he dropped the butt of his rifle to the ground with a savage growl.

"Go ahead, curse you!" he snarled. "Tain't none o' my biz—but *you'll* ketch it!" he added, turning to Kate.

"I'm not particularly alarmed!" she said, indifferently; then, raising her voice, she called to Bicycle Ben:

"Go ahead, sir! No one shall molest you while Kid Glove Kate is around, and don't you forget that! Go ahead, and accomplish your feat!"

"Thank you! The game is to stop me and make me lose my money and my life; but, all the same, I will make the trip!" Ben replied, from his aerial perch.

With these words he set the cycle into full motion, and away he sped up the incline at a speed much increased over that he had first exercised.

Neatly, and yet sometimes leaning at a fearful angle, he rounded the curves, and then glided onward and upward, the nickel plating of the machine glistening as the firelight in the gulch below reflected upon it.

Backward and forward across the gulch as ran the cable sped the dashing wheelman, until at last he reached the level of the mouth of the mine.

Then swinging his bat above his head and giving vent to a triumphant yell, he disappeared from view.

Anxiously did the spectators await for his reappearance, for it seemed to them that it would be harder for him to make the descent; and this was really the case.

But it was fully ten minutes ere Ben once more came into view, and astride his wheeled horse glided triumphantly down the slender path amid the thunderous cheers of the populace far below him.

CHAPTER IX. FATHER AND SON.

A FEW minutes later he was standing among the crowd, with his wheel beside him, victorious and flushed with triumph.

Above and around him rung cheer after cheer of applause, and Ben was besieged by miners, who were eager to seize his hand and shake it in hearty good-fellowship.

Kid Glove Kate had been right.

In order to make himself "solid" with the people of Lightning Lode he must needs have given practical proof that he was a man of more than ordinary ability and nerve.

This Bicycle Ben had to some extent accomplished, and many made manifest their hearty liking of the dashing wheelman.

Of course, because of the failure of his scheme to baffle Ben in his ride and thereby fraudulently win the wager money, Norris got into a furious passion; but getting no satisfaction from any quarter, he rushed down the street to his office where Casper Cutch was standing in the doorway.

"Give me that wager-money!" he cried, giving Cutch a push into the office. "Give me that money, I say!"

"You are not entitled to it!" Cutch quietly replied. "Mr. Ben made the ascent and descent,

according to agreement, and the money belongs to him!"

"That don't make a particle of difference. The money is mine, and I want it—and, what's more I'm going to have it. Give it to me, I say, you low-lived cur!"

"Take care how you address me, Nicholas Norris!" Cutch cried warningly, his cheeks flushing. "Please remember that I'm no boy, if I am your clerk, and I'll take no more insult from you than though I were a stranger!"

"Bah! You menial, and beggar! Give me that money, curse you."

"I'll do nothing of the kind, without the consent of the man who fairly won it," Cutch firmly replied.

"Ha! Won't you? Then, by the furies, I'll take it from you!" and with an animal-like snarl, he rushed upon his long-limbed book-keeper, as though he would annihilate him.

A clinch was, however, prevented, by Cutch, who quickly raising his right fist, planted it full in the mine-owner's face.

Norris went down like a log, and just at this juncture, Bicycle Ben, and the witnesses to the wager, entered the office.

"Hello! what's the matter, here?" Ben demanded.

"The matter is that Nicholas Norris tried to force me to give up the wager money to him, and I was forced to knock him down! Here is the money, sir. You are entitled to it."

"Thanks!" Ben said, receiving it! "And so, Norris tried a funny game, did he? Well, it but confirms my opinion of him!"

"Get out of my office!" Norris roared, struggling to his feet. "Git!" and seizing a club he made a motion to hurl it.

"Oh! that don't scare!" Ben retorted—"not a bit, Nick Norris. However, as I despise having anything to do with a man like you, I will turn my back," and with a mocking bow, he and the other two men took their departure.

When they were gone, Norris turned a furious glare upon Casper Cutch.

"And, now, sir, *you*—what have you got to say for yourself?"

"You attempted to assault me, and I knocked you down—a thing, sir, that ought to be of benefit to you, by learning you not to be so fresh, in the future!"

"Indeed? And do you know what that dastard blow will cost you?"

"No! I can't say that I do, as I did no particular harm to my knuckles!"

"It will cost you your situation—perhaps, your life!"

"Oh! I guess not. I am not afraid, Nick Norris, so far as my life is concerned, and in regard to my situation, you couldn't well do without me!"

Cutch was so composed and confident that Norris eyed him both anxiously and suspiciously.

"See here, what do you mean?" he demanded, angrily.

"Just what I said—that I don't think you could well get along without me. Furthermore, Nick Norris, if you want it straight, you dare not discharge me!"

Norris uttered a fearful oath.

"D'y'e defy me?" he hissed, his hands opening and shutting convulsively.

"No, but you know, and I know that it would not be advantageous to your interests to discharge me. That is all. My work for to-day is finished. If you desire me to return in the morning you must hunt me up!" and with a bow most stately, Casper Cutch left the office.

After his departure Norris dropped upon a chair, and sat there for a long time, his face the indicator of passion most intense—rage of the most rancorous kind.

The words of the clerk had cut deep into his heart, for only too well aware was he, that he was indeed, to some extent in Cutch's power, and this fact expressed by the clerk in person, gave the mine-owner great uneasiness.

"The wretch knows his power over me, where I always supposed he was dull and stupid about the matter!" he soliloquized. "If I discharge him he will use what knowledge he has against me. If I reinstate him in my services he will no doubt be triumphant and overbearing, and take advantage of every opportunity to let me know that he can snap his fingers at me, and I can't help myself. Curses upon him! Why was I not smart enough, at accounts, that I might never have needed a clerk?"

"There's one way," he muttered, at last; "it is safest, surest, and best, if it can be well managed. Dead men tell no tales, where if let live, Casper Cutch might ruin me. I will see to it before I sleep, or my name is not Nick Norris."

There came a knock upon the door, which Cutch had closed, on leaving the office.

"Well, come in!" the mine-owner called out, crustily, whereupon the door opened, and a man entered.

He was well-proportioned, well-dressed, and wore a well-kept brown beard.

"Frank—my son!" Nicholas Norris ejaculated, springing to his feet and grasping the newcomer by the hand.

"Sh! old man—you're wrong!" was the guarded reply. "I am Gilbert Garrick, and no kin of yours. Do you understand? There! that will do," disengaging his hand. "How is business?"

"Fairly good, but the outlook is better. You got my letters?"

"Cert; and was surprised to hear that you had succeeded to such a bonanza. And glad, too, you can bet, for of late my exchequer has been running rather low!"

"Don't let that fret you, for if things turn out right, there will be a plenty for both of us. Did you secure the documents?"

"Certainly! Upon getting your letters, I hunted up the fellow, Maccaw, and found that he had already obtained possession of the papers. I boarded the same stage he did, and accompanied him on the journey, together with some fellows I brought along, in case I might need them. When we were not many miles from here, I forced Maccaw to give up his possessions, making out that I suspected him of being a road-agent's decoy!"

"Ha! good! Excellent!"

"Oh! but hold on. You know there is often a worm-hole in a very good-tasting apple. And so it turned out, in this case. I stowed the precious papers away in my pocket, and was congratulating myself that the goose was hanging very high when suddenly the stage was surrounded by road-agents—there must have been a hundred of 'em, at the very least—and we were forced to give up everything; that is, I was, as I was the only one on whom demand was made, and everything had to go, papers and all. They cleaned me out to the last copper!"

Norris uttered a cry of disappointment and rage.

"You are sure about this?" he demanded, regarding his son keenly.

"Certainly," was the reply. "There is ample proof of it!"

"Who were these road-agents—El Creole's gang?"

"Yes."

"Then, by heaven, our interests are in imminent peril. Who this El Creole is I have no means of knowing, but I am satisfied that he has no particular amount of love for me, for I, individually, have suffered losses, through several of his stage robberies. If he uses the will at all, it will be against me, and in favor of the Martens."

"Perhaps he will offer to *sell* it to you?"

"That may be, but the chances I believe to be quite to the contrary. You know there is a charming daughter, and a not much less charming widow. He might angle after *them*! Consequently a note must be taken of every visitor who goes to the Martens' place of residence!"

"All right. Appoint me as spy, and I may be able to get up a match between father and son and widow and daughter, which would render arbitration superfluous."

"Very well. But, as you say, there is no immediate necessity of its being known in Lightning Lode that you are my son."

"Oh! certainly not—certainly not. Gilbert Garrick fits me admirably, and this artistic false wig and beard I wear, effectually prevent me from looking too much like my royal dad!"

Which in fact was true.

No one would have supposed the twain to be father and son.

CHAPTER X.

THE HE-UP-AND-HAW ON THE RAMPAGE.

WHILE Gilbert Garrick was announcing the news of the stage-robbery to his father, the other passengers of the coach were doing a like thing to the people of Lightning Lode.

The first thing Mambrinus Maccaw did, after reaching camp, was to seek the Roaring Ram, and stand the bartender off for a couple of drinks. As he was free in spending his money when he had any, he was able to thus secure a limited credit.

After partaking of the beverage, he made his way direct to the clothing establishment of Isaac Jacobs.

There was no one in the clothing department, when he entered, but Jacobs, himself, who eyed the bullwhacker eagerly.

"Vel, vat's der news?" he asked, leaning over the counter. "Uf you dells me you made oud all right I gif you a new suit of clot'ing!"

"Clothin', d'yer say?" the bullwhacker grunted, glaring hard at the merchant—"clothin'!" Waal! I should snort up a snake! Lookes heer, ye gol-darned sour-kraut bar'l, what d'yer take me fer—me, ther howlin', hydra-headed he-up-an'-haw from Hydrofoby Gulch! Me wear yer shoddy rags, what Italians picked up out o' ash-bar'ls! Great silver sand-jigs uv old Saint Vitus! Why I'd war bufler-skin, furst, cuss my boots, ef I wouldn't do thet same! Store-clothin' indeed, when a gazelle-like mid-summer's-night's-dream o' my forty-four caliber, war never known ter wear anything, 'cept bony-fide broad-cloth. Pooh! bah! biff. Whar's Mrs. Marten an' Myra?"

"Go vind oud!" Jacobs growled. "Maybe you vind 'em in der kidchen."

Without awaiing for a further invitation, Maccaw sought the rear domestic apartment of the shanty, and there found Mrs. Marten and her daughter, clearing away the supper dishes.

Both ladies uttered exclamations of joy, at sight of the giant.

"Oh! Mr. Maccaw, have you really got safely back?" Mrs. Marten said, shaking hands with him. "We are so very glad, for we were fearful that some harm might befall you. Tell us—have you got the papers?"

"No!" and the "he-up-and-haw" dropped into an arm-chair, his face gloomy—a thing remarkable, for him. "No, me leddy, I'm a howlin' hydra-headed he-up-an'-haw, an' kin lick ther best dozen o' men thet ever trod patent-leather—but, I hain't got them papers!"

Mrs. Marten and Myra both grew pale with apprehension.

"For Heaven's sake explain, sir," the widow exclaimed, anxiously. "What has happened? Couldn't you obtain them?"

"Yas, I got 'em all right, an' fetched 'em 'most to Lightning Lode—then lost 'em," Maccaw growled.

He then went on, in his uncouth way, to relate the stage-coach episodes, the particulars of which are already known.

The two women listened, their faces depicting their intense anguish.

"Oh heaven! all is then lost, indeed!" the widow said, covering her face with her hands, and bursting into tears, while Myra also wept softly. "Lost—and we are now naught but paupers!"

"No! I'll be teetotally cussed fer a polecat, ef you aire!" Maccaw said. "Et don't pay ter cry over spilt milk, but aire allus best ter try ter dip some o' et up w' a spoon. Thet aire one o' my golding rules, you bet, an' this hyer hydra-headed he-up-an'-haw ain't goin' ter git ther least bit discomfuddled about et—great jigs uv St. Vitus, no!"

"Oh! sir, but how can one but be discouraged? What possible prospect is there of winning back the Lightning Lode from Nick Norris, now that both the deed and the will are lost? Oh! it seems as if this loss would drive me crazy!"

"Oh nonsense! Yer know me—I'm hyer, an' yer friend, thru' blood an' bullets. We're jest goin' ter keep a stiff upper lip, an' ef I knows which d'rection a nor'wester blows, we'll win ther day, yet. Yer know I told yer thet I spic'ioned thet ther galoot, Gilbert Garrick, who I told yer about, were a snide. Thet ain't all I believe. Ther more I think erbout et, the more I calkylate thet ther sarcumstances o' Garrick's forcin' me to shell out, an' then, ther stage bein' stopped, an' El Creole's forcin' only him ter pony up—et hes a significance w'ot makes me allow thet it were all a put-up job ter git ther papers, w'out pertickler criminatin' Garrick! Great jigs o' St. Vitus, don't et look thet way ter you?"

"Now that you speak of it again, I must admit that it does look somewhat that way. And this man, Garrick—has he come to Lightning Lode?"

"Yas, an' ef I ain't green as er onyun sprout, he'll be ther clew from which we'll git ther next news o' ther stolen papers. Great gills of ther whale Jonah swallowed! I wish a feller war heer w'ot I uster know. His name war Yreka Jim—an' tork erbout yer detectives! Why, he jest extracted ther yeast right outen ther cake, did he! He war purty as an Appoller, sharp as a honed razor, an' reckless an' fearless as—I am, fer instance. Lord Jerusha! Ef he war heer, he'd jest snatch right hold o' ther case, an' in a jiffy thar'd be a Black Crook transfermashun,

wherein you'd be ockerpyin' a castle, an' Nick Norris w'u'd be doin' ther aerial tight-rope act!"

"Then, indeed, I wish he were here," Mrs. Marten said, "for I am sure I don't know what to do!"

"By the way, there is some such a person here in the camp," Myra said—"anyhow, he is brave and daring, for he rode a bicycle up the incline! He is very handsome, too. Indeed, I was quite impressed with him, when he came to the store to purchase some handkerchiefs."

"His name?" Maccaw asked.

"Why, every one calls him Bicycle Ben, and so I suppose that must be his name."

"Describe him."

Myra did so, as accurately as possible.

At which the bullwhacker manifested a good deal of excitement.

"Great oppery reels an' silver sand shin-digs of poor old St. Vitus! I'll bet a quart o' bug-juice ter a muskeeter's toe-nail, et's ther same feller, Yreka! Ef et aire, I ain't no midsummer-night's dream ef we don't go ter work an' kalsomine this hyer burg carmine!"

And with a few giant strides, Mambrinus had vanished, in eager search of the dashiag wheelman.

CHAPTER XI.

YREKA JIM'S REVELATION.

SHORTLY after accomplishing his wonderful feat upon the bicycle, and getting his wager money from Casper Cutch, Bicycle Ben repaired to the hotel, where, in the office, he encountered Kid Glove Kate, who motioned him to be seated at the table where she was sitting.

"You are a hero! Allow me to tender you my most hearty congratulation upon your remarkable performance!" she said, regarding him steadily. "You are now a solid man in Lightning Lode!"

"If so, I am indebted to you for the gain, whatever it may signify," Ben replied.

"Not at all. I wanted to see you get a starter. Have you called upon the Martens yet?"

"I dropped in at the store, and made a small purchase—that is all. I did not feel warranted in intruding myself into their private affairs."

"Well, I suppose not. Yet it is my desire that you enlist in their cause, and I am confident they will be glad to accept of your services. What do you think of Myra?"

"She is a very pretty girl."

"You are right, and I'll guarantee that she is every inch as good as she is pretty. Do you know what I'd like to see?"

"What?"

"Why, having proven to my satisfaction that you are a very ring among men—"

"Tut! tut! Here, now, none of that. I am not susceptible to flattery!"

"I am not flattering you. You are handsome, shrewd, intelligent and brave. I'd like nothing better than to see you get interested in the Marten family, and fall in love with Myra, and make her your wife!"

This was a startler for Bicycle Ben, and he gave vent to his surprise in a whistle.

"Say, look here! You're rushing matters, are you not?" he exclaimed. "You claim to not be intimate with these people, and yet here you are, advocating my marrying the girl! Who are you that are so much interested?"

"Kid Glove Kate, at your service. Do you not think you could like Myra enough to marry her?"

"Certainly not. Even though I might worship her, I could not marry her. As I told you, on our first meeting, I have a mission to perform, and until it is performed no woman is entitled to a thought from me beyond that of a passing acquaintance."

Kid Glove Kate was silent for a few moments, during which time she gazed intently at the table.

At length she reached over and touched him upon the arm.

"Look here!" she said, rather decidedly; "I want to know your opinion of me. Do you think I am your friend, or your enemy?"

"Well, of course, I have not been able to judge, to a certainty, thus far, but, from all I can see, your bearing toward me has been that of a friend."

"You are right. Although unknown to you, except in the character I now sustain, I am your friend, and the longer you know me the more apparent the fact will become to you. And, now, under such circumstances, I want you to do me a favor."

"Well, what is it?"

"Tell me the reason of your desire for revenge upon El Creole, the road-agent?"

Ben regarded her keenly.

"Why do you want to know?" he demanded.

"For no purpose detrimental to your interests, I assure you—more out of curiosity, than anything else."

"You say you know me?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"By having seen you once before."

"Where?"

"In Wake-Up."

"Ah! What was my name?"

"Yreka Jim!"

"Indeed! Did you see me more than once?"

"No. I was in Wake-Up, but a few hours. I have frequently heard about you, however, and many of your daring exploits."

After a short silence, Ben went on:

"Well, I have been known as Yreka Jim, and it is not impossible that you may have heard of me. As you request it, I will give you a brief idea of the cause of my enmity against El Creole."

"After I left Wake-Up, I settled, with my wife, upon a cattle-ranch we had purchased, in Vista Valley. We had some trouble in getting our ranch paid for, but finally got matters ship-shape, and were as happy as a pair of doves. Shortly after we got the place paid for, an old miner, eastward bound, stopped over night at Vista Villa, and was taken ill. Although we did every thing in our power for him, he failed rapidly, and finally died. Before he died, however, he made my wife a present of what wealth he had about his person, amounting to some twelve thousand dollars, stating that having no kith nor kin living, my wife was as much entitled to it as any one."

"Some time previously, my wife, a kind-hearted, loving soul, had adopted a bright little babe—an orphan of respectable parentage. She fairly idolized the little one, and took it with her wherever she went, as if afraid she would lose it."

"Among the herdsmen in my employ, and chief over the entire number, was a man known as Dick Dryden, but also called, by some, El Creole, as he had expressed a liking to that title over the first-mentioned name. He was a wild, reckless dare-devil—a sort of gentleman-cowboy, as it were, always scrupulously neat about his appearance—but, withal, an excellent party for the position he held, and I paid him a good salary."

"One day, shortly after the miner's death, my wife, with her babe, set out in her own carriage for the nearest town, ostensibly to do some shopping, but in reality to deposit eleven of her twelve thousand dollars in the bank for safe-keeping. The town was not a great distance away, nor was it a lonely or dangerous ride; so I did not accompany her; but when night drew on, and she did not return, I naturally grew alarmed, and sent for El Creole, intending to have him accompany me in search of her. To my astonishment, I learned that he had not been among the herders during the day."

"This at once aroused my suspicions, and, wild with anxiety, I mounted my horse and set out, at breakneck speed, in search of Martha and the babe."

Here the sport paused, for his voice was hoarse, and he was somewhat overcome with emotion.

Finally he went on:

"Well, I found her. Midway between my ranch and the village I came across the carriage, but the horse was missing, and so was the babe. Upon the ground, near at hand, lay my wife, with a hunting-knife plunged through her heart. She had been dead several hours when I found her, and pinned upon her clothing was a notice in the following words:

"Yours truly, El Creole!"

"Well, I will not dwell upon what is a pain to my heart. I buried Martha, and then set out upon the trail of vengeance. The whole country about Vista Valley was aroused, but this was all in vain. El Creole had made good his escape, and I alone was finally left to hunt him up, bound by a terrible oath to find and kill him. This I will do if my life is spared long enough. It was not until recently that I learned that he was at the head of a band of road-agents in this vicinity. Hence my presence in Lightning Lode!"

Kid Glove Kate had listened without interrupting him, and had apparently been deeply interested in his narration.

"I am very sorry—very—to hear you have had such bad luck," she said; "and think you

perfectly justified in maintaining the right to wreak vengeance upon El Creole, and I shall be rejoiced when I learn that you have obtained it. Do you think that the babe still lives?"

"I don't know, I am sure. Sometimes I believe it to be dead, and then, again, something tells me that it is not."

"Poor thing! I've an idea that in a few days—"

Whatever else she might have added, was at this instant cut short by a wild yell, and the entrance, with a noisy clatter, of the giant bullwhacker.

End over end, he came tumbling into the office of the hotel, giving vent to yell after yell, causing what bystanders were lounging about to step back in alarm.

Over and over did the huge man handspring, until he finally brought himself "up a-standing" close to the table, where Bicycle Ben and Kid Glove Kate were seated.

The latter exchanged inquiring glances, while, with a snort like a locomotive exhaust, Mambrinus Maccaw thrust out his dirty hand.

"Kerwhoop! Great double-shuffle an' jubadance uv old Saint Vitus! put 'er thar, ye sweet-scented soarin' luminary! Put 'er thar, saith I, and grip the fightin'-fist uv ther future president o' this hyer adamantine terrest'ial toadstool! Shake, I say—"

"Shake ther pritty paw
Of Mambrinus Maccaw,
From East Saginaw;
Who's lots of ther 'filthy,'
An' plenty o' jawl!"

Then, as Bicycle Ben refused to shake, he bent forward, and whispered in the wheelman's ear.

"Sh! mum's the word! I know you, an' ye'r wanted! Big job, an' purty gal in it. Come to the clothin'-store, an' ye shall know all."

Ben involuntarily looked at Kid Glove Kate.

"Go!" she advised. "It's your chance for an introduction. Go an' get your bearings—then, when I see you again, I may possibly be able to show you something."

"What?"

"A baby!"

He shot her an eager glance; then, rising, with a mind filled with wonderment, he followed Mambrinus Maccaw from the hotel.

While Kid Glove Kate sat for a few minutes in deep reflection; then, she also arose and quitted the office, going out upon the street.

CHAPTER XII.

MOSE AND HIS "MARSE."

MAMBRINUS MACCAW took Bicycle Ben direct to the dwelling portion of Jacob's establishment, by the rear way, and when they entered the kitchen, an introduction followed between the two ladies and Ben.

"Didn't I tell ye so?—great jigs of St. Vitus, didn't I tell ye so?" Maccaw cried, dancing around, dog-fashion, and "cutting up" other queer antics. "This aire Yreka Jim, ther feller I tried ter kill onc't, when I war only two inches from having the 'rams.' But that's all past an' gone, an' I'll bet a quart of whisky ag'in' a muskeeter's toe-nail thet he'll fergive me, an' put out his paw ter help the widder and orphan!"

"Mr. Maccaw has been a friend to us," Mrs. Marten hastened to say, "and if he has done wrong in the past, sir, I am sure he is doing right now," and she gazed appealingly at Bicycle Ben.

"Yes, Mr. Maccaw has been very good to us," Myra added, "and we hope you two gentlemen will be friends."

"In consideration of your appeal, it shall be as you say!" Ben answered, putting out his hand to Maccaw, who shook it warmly. "Although this man once united with others, in an attempt upon my life, I will accept his excuse that he was a hard drinker, and overlook the matter. And now, ladies, allow me to announce myself as at your disposal. Through the voluntary confidence of a certain person of this camp, I have learned much about you, and the trouble you are in, and have been requested to offer you any assistance in my power. I presume it was in your behalf that our friend here came to me?"

"Great mazurky of old St. Vitus! yer can bet it was!" Maccaw declared, emphatically. "I know'd ef you war Yreka Jim, ye c'd take a hand in ther game, an' win et, same's ye won ther game up in Wake Up. When a gerloot gits away wi' you, Yreka, in bevel-edged smartness, et aire natterally tew be expected thet old Gab'r'l aire goin' ter toot his trumpet most any minnit!"

Then followed explanations and exchange of views, and it is enough to say that, by the end of an hour, the little quartette in Isaac Jacobs's kitchen, understood each other, and the situation, tolerably well.

Bicycle Ben then said:

"Ladies, it is a pleasure to me that I have been called upon to espouse your cause, for, not only am I always eager to defend the weak and sinned-against, but I feel a certain amount of confidence that I can bring the kinks out of this case before long—not wishing to brag, of course, of any ability I may possess. If, as you surmise, this Gilbert Garrick and El Creole are in complicity, in regard to the theft of the papers, I do not anticipate that it will take me long to get upon the trail of the latter. In order to facilitate the instant and proper working of my plans, it is necessary I should be an eaves-dropper to every word that passes between you and certain persons who may call upon you. Or, Maccaw here can take my place, when I am otherwise occupied. Now, in case of your having callers, how can it be arranged?"

"Very easily. Yonder door opens off of this kitchen into a small bedroom, which also has a door opening into the rear yard. If any one calls to interview me, I will make it a point to not be at liberty to converse with any one until you have had time to enter the bedroom and are prepared to listen. Then I will be sufficiently deaf, so that my visitor will have to talk loud."

"Capital—capital! That's a good idea of yours. And now, I'll bid you good-evening, and go out about town, as I may be able to pick up some points. Maccaw, you are to remain here constantly, both as a messenger and a defender, and come for me whenever I am wanted."

"Correct! Yer bet yer boots I'll do jest what yer say, Yreka!"

"Do so, and all will be well. So good-evening all, and if I am wanted ere I call again, send for me without delay."

Bicycle Ben, as we shall still continue to call him, took his departure, and went back to the hotel, eager to find Kid Glove Kate, but the strange woman was not there.

Considerably disappointed, he set out on a tour of the various resorts, hoping to find her in some one of them; but his search was unsuccessful.

In the mean time, there is another character of our romance whom we must needs look after, in the person of the negro—Mose Williams.

When the passengers of the broken-down coach arrived at the outskirts of the town, the negro made a sudden and, to Maccaw, an unaccountable disappearance.

Being busied with his own thoughts, the giant paid little attention to the matter, and as the rest of the passengers were some distance ahead, Williams's "drop-out" caused no comment.

When the party were well into the town, the sable gentleman made his appearance from behind a pile of bowlders, and after taking a good look around him, and giving vent to a triumphant "Yah! yah!" he skulked cautiously along toward the town, his face showing one constant expression of satisfaction.

Instead of going directly into the camp, he kept upon its outskirts, and finally halted in the rear of a shed, built for the purpose of storing the stage coach.

After scouting around, to satisfy himself that there was no one in the vicinity, he threw himself upon the grass and waited.

Not for a few minutes, but long and patiently, his watchfulness and attention to every sound proving that he was expecting some one.

It was over an hour ere he heard an approaching footstep; then he sat up, eagerly.

Directly a man came around one corner of the shed, the moonlight falling full upon him—a man, commonly dressed, and wearing a slouch hat, and a long, yellowish beard.

Mose sprung to his feet with a glad cry:

"Hi! Marse—"

"Shut your mouth!" the other commanded, gruffly. "You dare to utter my name and I'll cut your black throat. So, you're here, are you, at last?"

"Deed an' course I'se hiyar!" Mose declared. "Can't you done see I'm hiyar—'ca'se de moonlight am shinin'?"

"None of your nonsense. You understand what I sent for you for?"

"Yas, 'deed I does."

"Well, are you ready to do what I want of you?"

"Deed I is, sure's bacon hab grease in it, marse!"

"It is well. You naturally expect an after remuneration for the service?"

"I leabs dat fo' you to say, marse!"

"You're quite a sensible nigger, Mose. You shall be well paid. But, now, look here. I am not quite ready for you, yet, and you must lie low. If you were seen in Lightning Lode, you know what the consequences would be. There'd be a dead nigger, waitin' a funeral. So, you see, until you are wanted, you must keep yourself carefully out of sight."

"All right, marse; I'se can do dat. I'll keep shady in de daytime, not fur from hiyar, an' at night I'll be 'roun' hiyar, watchin' fo' you."

"All right. I'll see you, then, to-morrow night!"

And turning upon his heel, the "marse" strode away, leaving his sable acquaintance to himself and his thoughts, whatever they might be.

CHAPTER XIII.

ALMOST A MURDER.

FAILING to find Kid Glove Kate in any of the drinking or gaming resorts or upon the street, Bicycle Ben concluded that she had taken herself to her bed for the night, and consequently gave up the search.

Feeling too wide awake to retire himself, he wandered about the camp for a couple of hours, and finally brought up in the Roaring Ram.

Red Ryan had not yet made himself visible for that night, and there were numerous inquiries as to his whereabouts, but the bartender simply shook his head, and allowed that Ryan must be busy in his room.

Among the assemblage within the gaming-den was Gilbert Garrick, who paced to and fro as if nettled about something or other. His face, too, wore a rather malignant expression, while his eyes gleamed wickedly.

"Give me some whisky!" he growled, striding up to the bar where Bicycle Ben was just taking a "nip." "Give me some whisky, I say!"

"Not without cash," the bartender calmly replied. "I gave you one drink on the strength of the stage robbery, and that's all."

Garrick uttered a fearful curse, and was about to turn away, when Ben, whose back had been partly turned to him, touched him on the arm.

"I say, friend, I'm just moistening my thorax—take a smile with me," he said.

The sound of the wheelman's voice caused Garrick to turn quickly.

His face, however, betrayed no trace of surprise.

"Thank you, sir, I don't mind if I do, as my throat is parched with the dust of to-day's journey. My name is Garrick—Gilbert Garrick."

"And mine is Ben Bird—better known as Bicycle Ben."

"Ah, yes—exactly," and the elegantly be-whiskered rascal poured out a brimming glass. "Here is my regards and future acquaintance, Mr. Bird."

They drank, and then without a word Garrick sauntered to the further end of the room.

Bicycle Ben gazed sharply after him, a strange expression in his piercing eyes.

"A very polite 'Thank you—git out!'" was his unuttered thought. "That is Mr. Gilbert Garrick, eh, whom Maccaw suspects of having a silent finger in the stage robbery case? Hum! hum!"

Although not appearing to do so, the wheelman never lost sight of Garrick's movements for an instant, and the more he secretly watched him, the stronger became his conviction that this man with the stunning whiskers was none and other than his once dashing herdsman, and the murderer of poor Martha!

As the thought grew upon him, and the past came sweeping across his memory, Bicycle Ben shut his teeth hard together, and left the saloon.

"It's him—I'm positive of it!" he muttered. "But, if so, who filled his place in stopping to-night's stage? A lieutenant, no doubt!"

At this juncture, two men came from the saloon, miners, who were evidently going home.

"Ain't it queer where Red Ryan is, to-night?" one of them remarked, as they passed.

"Oh! I don't know!" the other carelessly replied. "He frequently goes out of an evening, and don't return till midnight."

They then passed beyond hearing.

While, as they did so, Bicycle Ben ran his fingers through his silken hair.

"What is this? Red Ryan makes these nocturnal absences, frequently, does he? And Mr. Gilbert Garrick acted as if he were nervous and

awaiting some one. Hal! by heaven, I believe I've spotted both men. Gilbert Garrick is El Creole, I am sure, because his walk and his every movement reminds me of the murderous devil—and Red Ryan is his lieutenant. Accordingly, Red Ryan must have Mrs. Marten's papers. Gods! if this be true, I must work!"

Without a word, he strode off down the street. The hour was getting late, and most of the business places had closed up, making the rude thoroughfare quite gloomy.

Ben had not come to Lightning Lode unprepared, for that was a precaution he would never have thought of omitting—careful preparation.

While he had ridden into Lightning Lode camp, with apparently no baggage, that fact did not signify that he had not brought any with him, to that vicinity. Just outside the town he had secreted a large satchel, containing a choice collection of expert disguises, which he had had prepared, upon starting out on his trail of vengeance.

Now, on leaving the Roaring Ram, it was his intention to hunt up this satchel, and, after thoroughly disguising himself, return to the Roaring Ram, and keep an eye upon Red Ryan and Gilbert Garrick.

He had not yet got out of the camp, proper, when he became suddenly aware that a man was ahead of him, proceeding in the same direction he was pursuing.

This man was so far ahead that his foot-falls were inaudible, but Ben could distinctly see his moving figure.

It was Nicholas Norris.

Not a hundred yards ahead of him, was another person, sauntering leisurely along.

It was Casper Cutch.

Being restless the clerk had started forth for a moonlight stroll, which he usually took every pleasant evening.

Knowing this, Nick Norris had lain in waiting in his office, until Cutch had passed by, then, with murder in his heart, he had followed.

Cutch was in love, although no one knew it, but himself.

Myra Marten's pretty face and eyes, and winsome manners, had affected the clerk, and, although he had not the courage to say so to her, he was conscious that he was madly in love with her; so he took to these nocturnal strolls, that his dreams might be undisturbed.

Therefore, although the man behind him gained upon him rapidly, the love-sick swain was unaware of the peril menacing him—unaware that his employer held a dirk-knife firmly in his grasp, ready and anxious to commit a murder.

Nearer and nearer the would-be assassin crept toward his intended victim, until not an arm's-length separated them—then, the moonlight reflected with glistening effect upon the knife-blade, as it was poised for the fatal blow.

But, a strong grasp seized the mine-owner's wrist, and the villain was whirled around, facing—Bicycle Ben!

"Whoa! January!" the wheelman commanded. "None of that fer midnight lunch, ef ye please. It won't work when I'm around, friend Norris! If this man wants to be carved, why, he can easy let out the job to more experienced butchers than you!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MAN WHO "HOWLED."

WORDS are inadequate to express the rage of Nicholas Norris, as he glared upon the sport-detective, who had baffled his murderous scheme to get rid of Casper Cutch.

"Ten thousand curses on ye!" he hissed. "Release my hand or I'll—"

"What'll you do?" Ben interrupted, derisively. "Will you swallow me whole, or eat me in sections?"

"Let go my wrist I tell you!" the mine-owner roared.

Without replying, Bicycle Ben turned to Casper Cutch, who had paused and was "taking in" the scene in great astonishment.

"Do you know this would be assassin, sir?" Ben demanded.

"Well, I should say so!" Cutch replied. "I have been his confidential clerk for a number of months—ever since before Melvin Marten died."

"What cause had he for this attempt to murder you?"

"Because I knocked him down, I suppose."

"Ah! I see, now. You are the party who held the wager money. I did not recognize you. So, that is the only reason of this villain's attempted assault, is it?"

Cutch hesitated for a moment, his gaze fixed upon Norris's malignant face.

"Well—yes, that explanation will answer for the present," he finally responded. "I'll be on my guard hereafter."

"Do you want to let the wretch go, then?" Ben demanded, in surprise.

"Yes. For reasons of my own I do not care to make a charge against him just now."

"Then, I'll be blamed if I interfere again, even if I see him killing you. If you're so weak-kneed as to let a man of his character off, scot free, without punishment, you deserve to be stuck!"

"Perhaps so, but I have private reasons for wishing him to go free at present. I am amply able to take care of myself, except when he creeps upon me like a snake!"

"Very well. Nick Norris, you are free. But, beware! If I ever catch you at any more of this sort of business I'll not merely catch your arm but will put a bead right through your rotten-brained cranium. Now, then, drop that knife and get back to town, the quickest you know how, or blest if I don't shoot you before you get out of my sight."

The sport's tones were fierce and ringing: he was a dangerous man to trifle with just then.

And Norris knew it.

With a vindictive oath he dropped the knife, and turning strode silently back toward Lightning Lode.

When he had disappeared from view the wheelman turned to address Casper—turned—toward where that young gentleman had been standing, but he was nowhere to be seen.

A peculiar whistle escaped Ben's lips.

So he has mosed off, too, has he?" he muttered, knitting his brows. "He evidently did not care to stand cross-questioning from me. All of which satisfies me that there is something behind the scene that I do not understand. Of one thing I am sure, it was not the knock-down that caused Nick Norris to follow Cutch, and attempt to knife him—not by a jugful. The clerk has been a confidential clerk," as he admitted, and he knows more of Norris's secrets than is good for Norris's peace of mind. Very likely, when he knocked Norris down, the mine-owner thought it a good excuse to rid himself of so dangerous an employee. Anyhow, that's the way it looks to me, and I'll bet I ain't far out of the way. Mr Cutch may prove a valuable aid to the Martens, if he is 'worked up' right."

Thus musing, Bicycle Ben continued on his way to the place where he had secreted his satchel.

To return to the Roaring Ram. It was all of midnight ere the stalwart proprietor, Red Ryan, made his appearance at the gaming establishment. He entered by the front way, and stepping up to the bar, called out, to the score of people who still lingered in the place:

"Red Ryan always drinks at this hour, gents; walk up and take a snifter!"

It was an invitation often made, and the crowd made no hesitation in accepting it—all except one man, and he a stranger in the camp.

He sat at a card-table, idly shuffling a pack of the paste-boards, while before him, upon the table, were two buckskin bags, each filled with about a quart of something that might, or might not be, gold.

He was a well-built individual, attired in mud-splashed corduroy, top-boots, and a hat slouched down to his eyes. His hair was dark, and a heavy jet-black beard swept down upon his shirt front, and, for the most part, covered his face.

In his belt was a pair of large revolvers; also a knife large enough to be suggestive of ugly business.

All in all, he was a dark, disagreeable looking fellow.

Not the least attention did he pay to the invitation to drink, a fact that by no means escaped Red Ryan, for he turned quickly around from the bar, with a scowl.

"I say, stranger, I believe I announced that it was my treat. Why don't you come up?"

"Thank you, sir—thank you very much, but you will excuse me, I know, when I tell you that I do not indulge," the stranger said, in a soft, mellow voice, that was hard at contrast with his fierce appearance.

"But you've got to drink!" Ryan growled.

"I run this ranch, an' I ain't often I show my liberality by treatin'; so when I do, everybody feels disposed to drink, or there's a funeral, right off quick!"

"Oh! well, if it's a matter of compulsion, I'll of course acquiesce," was the oily answer, and the stranger arose and advanced to the bar.

The drinks were partaken of, and then, as the stranger returned to his seat, Red Ryan once more addressed him:

"Pardon me, stranger, but might I inquire your handle? I once knew a man who looked somewhat like you."

"Oh! that is quite probable. My name—or at least my 'handle'—is Black Bret."

"Black Bret, eh?"

"Exactly!"

The man's tone was becoming more independent.

"Miner, I take it?" Ryan queried.

"Some," was the laconic answer—"some gambler!"

"Ah!"

"Exactly. If you want the particulars, I'll inform you that two years in the West has done me little good, except the boodle on the table—there's gold, silver, diamonds and greenbacks, all mixed up, indiscriminately. My name is Black Bret, and in 'most all respects, I'm a bad man!"

"You look it!" Ryan asserted. "Going East, now, I suppose?"

"Well, no—not just yet awhile. You see, I'm layin' for a snap—hain't rich enough. That aire paire of buckskin pouches assay five thousand dollars. Before I turn my pedals eastward I intend to inflate 'em five better, so I kin live in a two-story brick, eat off o' silver, have a nigger waiter, and run a faro-bank!"

"How do you propose to manage this inflation?" Ryan demanded, dryly.

"Oh! as far as that is concerned, in any way I can. But I am mainly laying around loose, waiting to jump some fellow—some genius, you know—who has more money than brains, and are willing to bulge up a like boodle, and play for whole hog or none. That is the very circumstance I'm awaitin' to creep my way!"

"Then, I opine, my dear sir, that you have crept right into the right cuckoo nest," Red Ryan announced, confidently. "Come up and have another horn, with me, and you and I will adjourn to the festive table, and I'll let you carry away five thousand of my lucre on your Eastern trip if you can scoop it in."

"You are royally kind, my dear sir, but I hope you will not class me as a presumptuous pilgrim if I suggest that you 'howl' with me this time, and at my expense. I'll be pleased to howl with you, to-morrow," and walking over to the bar, the singular customer slapped down a twenty-dollar gold-piece.

"Gents," he said, waving his hand to the bystanders, "you will now howl at the expense of Black Bret—"

"Howl", not once
But 'howl' ag'in,
'Howl' till yer diaphragm gits thin,
'Howl' tew yer landlord,
'Howl' at all sin,
An' keep on a-'howlin' till the eye grows dim!"

Which the crowd took as an earnest that Mr. Black Bret intended to do the "posy" * act, right florally.

And they were not wrong.

Time after time the stranger "set 'em up," each time insisting that it was his turn to 'howl,' and that he would 'howl' with Red Ryan, to-morrow!

Not until the twenty dollars reposed serenely behind the bar did the man desist, and turn, rather drowsily, to Ryan.

"Now, pard, ef you will produce your boodle, we'll proceed to bounce it right beautifully. Understand, before we squat, it's to be a square game, and I've got optics in all parts of my head, and if I ketch you cheating or filabustering, you're a stiff in the exact time fer the breath to git out of your anatomical construction. Do you full well and completely understand the peculiar rhythm of my remarks?"

"The game shall be square and upon its merits. I never play anything else!" Red Ryan said, curtly. "I never play any other way. Fetch your swag, and come along."

He led the way to a table, whereat Gilbert Garrick had already become seated, and in an unsteady gait, evidently feeling considerably the worse for the 'howls' he had partaken. Black Bret followed his lead.

CHAPTER XV.

EUCHER—AND "EUCHERED!"

IN some respects Red Ryan was a keen observer. He saw, or fancied he saw, that it would not require many more drinks to put Black Bret in a stupid condition.

So, as soon as they were seated at the table, he ordered a bottle of wine.

* Western slang for "setting 'em up."

"It won't do for us to choke to death," he remarked. "And, now, my friend, here is five thousand against your stake, I of course taking your word for it that the value of the contents of them bags, is equal to the amount of my pile."

"I'll guarantee to that effect!"

"Very well! What shall we play?"

"Eucher!"

"Eh?"

"Eucher, I said."

"Oh! All right; best two out of three games?"

"Agreeable."

"Then, Mr. Garrick, you take the slate and keep game!" and turning to the bystanders, Red Ryan added:

"Boys, drink at the bar, at my expense, but keep away from this game. It is private, between Mr. Bret and myself!"

The crowd slunk away; Ryan next knocked the neck off the wine bottle, and poured out three brimming glasses.

"Drink, pard, before we play," he said, he and Garrick each raising their glass.

The drinks were imbibed, and then the cards produced.

The first game was played slowly, but at last wound up, in favor of Black Bret.

The slowness was owing to the winner's apparent intoxication and sleepiness, Ryan frequently having to call upon him to play.

At the end of the game, more wine was indulged in, and then, the second game was begun, Black Bret acting sleeper and more stupid.

The game was not much more than half-finished, when he threw his cards over to Garrick.

"Yous er (hic) play zer hand for me. I's er (hic) too—"

He did not finish the sentence, but resting his arms upon the table, allowed his head to fall forward on them, with a thump.

"Gone case!" whispered Garrick. "Shall I play his game?"

"Of course!" Ryan replied, gruffly. "I won't skin even a drunken man."

Then, they played on, in silence.

Both were shrewd players, and it soon became apparent that Garrick meant to win, if possible.

In the mean time, loud snores indicated that Black Bret was asleep, and oblivious of the fact that he wanted to carry a cool ten thousand, East, with him.

The other occupants of the saloon, being barred out of the pleasure of watching the game, one by one took their departure, until, aside from the party at the table, there was but one man left, and he the bartender, who, taking advantage of a lull in business, stretched himself on top of the bar, and went off into a sound sleep—the sleep of the "innocent."

Red Ryan won the second game by the skin of his teeth, and the third was begun.

It was rapidly played, and Garrick won, eliciting a curse from Ryan.

"Why growl?" Garrick asked, shoving the stakes over to the gambler. "I don't want that; I want something of more importance—those documents!"

"Do you?" was the significant reply, and a strange glitter entered the gambler's eyes. "Wouldn't you rather have this boodle?"

"Oh! no. The papers are of much more value to me. Let me have them!"

"Oh! don't get impatient now. How do you know but what the papers are likewise valuable to me?"

"To you?"

And Garrick began to look enraged.

"Yes, to me. Didn't you hear the echo of my gentle voice?"

"Curse you, Ryan, why provoke me? Give me the papers."

"You must not get impatient," Ryan replied, with a smile that was full of triumph. "You are a man of enough experience to know that possession is a 'heap' many points in law, and I having possession, why should I not keep what I have got? It's an old adage, you know—'keep what you've got and get what you can.'"

"To the devil with your adage! Don't you intend to give me the papers, Ryan?"

Garrick was trying hard to keep his temper down.

"Now, really, you're too hasty," Ryan replied, provokingly. "I haven't had the papers but a few hours, Cap—"

"Sh! you idiot! This fellow may be listening!"

"He listening—that soaker?" and the gambler snapped his finger contemptuously at Bret. "Why, he's so drunk he wouldn't hear a cannon go off. No, Cap, really, I've only had the papers such a little while that I haven't had

time to form any particular plans for their disposal. I have already put them in a safe place, where I can get them when I want them, and am now—or shall be soon—prepared to negotiate in regard to them. The fact is, Cap, the boys have all signified their preference for myself, over you, as their captain. They don't seem to take kindly to you of late for some cause or other, and have already petitioned me to take your place. No doubt you will receive notice shortly that your services are no longer required!"

Garrick's face had become livid, and white with rage, by turns.

"You are lying!" he gasped.

"I am not!" was the reply. "What I tell you, is true."

"Curse them! curse you! If this be true, that they have gone back on me, I'll—"

"Do nothing rash! It wouldn't be healthy for you to expose us, when you come to consider that two of the boys are in camp, in disguise, and know your every movement."

For a moment Garrick gave himself up to awful profanity; then became more calm.

"Well?" he said, interrogatively. "If I am to be thus ousted unceremoniously from my position, what next?"

"Nothing, only to keep yourself rationally quiet. As long as you remain in this state, no one will be the wiser for it that you are, or, rather, were, El Creole, the road-agent."

"Will you hold your tongue, curse you? Do you want to betray me? That appears to be your design! Give me those papers, and the gang can go to the devil."

"You cannot have the papers—at least, not yet!" Red Ryan declared. "There are three parties who want 'em—yourself, Nick Norris, and the widow Marten. Whichever feels inclined to come down the handsomest gets the papers. Of course, by association, you are entitled to the first chance, but I want you, also, to understand one thing—I've an eye on the widow's blooming daughter, and in a moment of love spasm, may conclude to give the widow the documents in exchange for her daughter. So if you propose to open up negotiations you'd better be sly."

Although trembling with rage Garrick held his passion wonderfully in check, for he was well enough aware that Red Ryan's right hand rested upon the butt of a revolver.

"You have proven yourself a rank traitor, Ryan!" he declared, at length, "and think you have me in your power. But, you shall find out your mistake, sooner or later. How much will you take for those papers?"

"All I can get, and more too! I don't intend to stipulate any particular price, although, of course, I shall consider all offers."

"Will ten thousand dollars buy them?"

"No! Nor four times ten!"

"You're a fool!"

"Oh! not quite!"

"But I say you are."

"How do you make that out?"

"Easy. The mine isn't worth fifty thousand."

"Bah! It would sell for twice fifty, and is daily growing richer!"

"Well, suppose I were to shove fifty thousand dollars, in greenbacks before your vision, as an offer for the documents?"

Ryan scratched his head, meditatively.

Fifty thousand dollars!

It was certainly a magnificent sum.

Should he refuse it, would he realize as much or more from any other source?

It was a question!

"I am not quite prepared to give you a definite answer," he said, at length, and slowly. "The prospects are, however, that I should look inquiringly at the cash, some seconds, before I would refuse it!"

"Very well. I will try you. How soon can you have the documents here?"

"Not before to-morrow!"

"Very well. I will test you, then. I think I will retire to the hotel, now. Going to leave the old snoozer asleep, here?"

"Yes; I never yet was guilty of kicking a man out of doors who had got full on my whisky—especially, after my raking in five thousand of his cash!"

And the villain uttered a dry laugh as he put his own wager money in his pockets, and laid hold of the pouches.

Garrick then took his departure, and after he was gone, Red Ryan sought his room over the saloon.

Seating himself at a table, he proceeded to examine the contents of the two pouches, emptying them out upon the table.

A cry of rage escaped him.

There was no gold—there were no diamonds—no greenbacks—nothing but a worthless lot of pebbles, sand and paper.

He had been nicely "taken in and done for."

With an oath, he sprang down the stairs, two steps at a time.

The bartender was stretched out upon the bar, and snoring, loudly.

But Black Bret, was gone!

Like the Arab, he had literally, folded his tent and stolen silently away!

CHAPTER XVI.

A FLAT REFUSAL.

SECRETLY boiling with rage was Gilbert Garrick when he left the Roaring Ram.

An arrant coward at all times, except when surrounded by a crowd of his allies, he stood in genuine fear of Red Ryan, who had been his lieutenant and right-hand man, since the road-agents had located in the vicinity of Lightning Lode.

In fact, Ryan had really been the captain, as Garrick seldom led an attack upon a stage-coach, his men believing that it was because he was afraid to face a muzzle.

He now knew that Ryan had the upper hand, and that he was powerless. He knew Ryan to be too wily a man to carry the papers about his person; instead, he had secreted them somewhere, the place alone known to himself, where in the event of his death they would probably never be disturbed; hence, to take Red Ryan's life would be to lose the "cue," upon which Garrick was scheming to realize a fortune for himself.

"Yes," he muttered, "the only clear way now is to give the old man the borrow for the fifty thousand. He hardly dare refuse me, and once I get it, he can go to the deuce. If I get the papers, the widow will marry me rather than lose all hopes of getting the mine. To blazes with the girl—I want the widow. She's the most admirable article, and there's the most tin to be made out of her, as an investment."

Instead of going to the hotel, as he had told Ryan was his intention, he went direct to the office of Nicholas Norris.

A light was dimly burning within, and his rap upon the door was answered with a surly—

"Come in!"

Garrick entered, and closed the door behind him.

Norris was seated at his writing table, his visage drawn into a fierce scowl. He evidently had been brooding over matters of an unpleasant nature.

"Well?" he demanded, raising his eyes, as Garrick threw himself upon a chair, elevated his heels to a table and proceeded to light a cigar. "What now?"

"Lots!" Garrick announced, smiling blandly.

"I see you are in a bad mood, and want some good news; so I thought I'd drop in and give you a pointer, to gladden your slumbers—or, don't you ever sleep?"

"Occasionally. But, what news is it you have? I'm not in the best mood to-night, and won't stand any trifling."

"Oh! you'll liven up as I proceed. 'It's about the papers.'"

"Well, what about the papers?"

The old rascal's face never changed color or expression. It was as hard and grim as adamant.

"Well, they've been found," Garrick said, blandly. "Found, and are now within our grasp, or pretty nearly so."

"Well? I am awaiting the particulars."

"And, you shall have them, my royal dad. You see, there is a certain person in this camp who regularly goes courting a trapper's daughter, up in the mountains. To-night, he made his accustomed visit, and was fired upon by a lone horseman as he was returning. He fired back, and the man took to flight, but, in doing so, dropped a leathern bag. The man from Lightning Lode secured its contents, and examined them; and found Melvin Marten's last will. Knowing of the circumstances of the case, he came to Lightning Lode, and recognizing in me an old-time acquaintance and a staunch friend, he took me into his confidence. He says he is going to make a fortune out of it—the documents—in one of two ways. He'll sell 'em to me, providing I'll pay his price, or else, he'll give 'em to the widow, for a half interest in the mine, and her daughter's hand in marriage. The chances are big, that, if something ain't done right quick, the widow will get the benefit!"

"What is this man's name?" Norris demand-

ed, with a calmness that provoked Garrick, exceedingly.

"That is something he will not have divulged. He is an individual that does not entertain the best opinion in regard to your integrity, and yet, if you pay his price, he will sell you the papers, through me!"

"Through you?"

"Yes. He is as crafty as a fox. He prefers to keep himself *incog.*, except to me. You see, should he sell the papers to you, he is laying himself liable, as it would be the same thing as dealing in stolen goods."

"How much does he expect for the papers, then?"

"Well, he has estimated the value of the mine at \$100,000, at the least. He calculates if he were to bargain with the widow he'd be sure to make himself solid for a half interest, anyhow. Therefore, taking this into consideration, he allows he will get fifty thousand for the papers, or else dicker with the widow."

"And, so the scheme is—"

"For you to give me the cash, I will secure the papers, and—"

"Tell me that I can hump my back for both the fifty and the papers!" Norris finished, in a harsh, grating tone. "Frank, you're a fool. Roaming through the various phases of Western life has impaired your mental faculties!"

"But—but—"

"Shut up! None of your 'buts' to me—not a one, sir! I won't have them! Do you for an instant suppose, that after an existence of over half a century, I am as dumb as an oyster? Do you flatter yourself that an opportunity is gaping for you to 'take your old dad in and do for him'? If so, my unscrupulous offspring, you are sadly mistaken."

Garrick took the cigar from his mouth, between his fingers, and looked at his sire in great apparent astonishment.

"Well! well! If you don't beat the Dutch!" he ejaculated. "Why, you knock the wind clean out of me! What ever put such ideas into your foolish head?"

"Oh! undoubtedly I must have had a dream last night!" and the mine-owner vented a sarcastic laugh. "No! no! son, it won't work, in any way you can fix it. You bring your man to me, and perhaps I can strike a bargain with him—but not with you, oh! no!"

Garrick preserved a wonderful coolness, although a red spot at his temples and a snakish glitter in his eyes told how much he was enraged.

"Well, I am sorry you have so misconstrued my motives," he said, "for it loses me much of my natural interest in you. Of course, if you want the widow to bounce you out of the fat berth you now occupy, it's none of my business—none at all! In fact, because of your suspicious stubbornness, I believe I should now rather favor the widow's getting the property. If I cannot affiliate with you, it is quite possible that I can with her and her charming daughter!"

This shot appeared to tell.

"See here, Frank, no more of this nonsense. I don't believe you gave up the papers, at all. You have got them, and want to extort fifty thousand dollars out of me!"

"If I had them I should not do anything of the kind—that is, if I had dishonest intentions, as you have insultingly suggested. If I wanted to do that, and had the papers, do you know what I'd do?"

"No!"

"Well, I'll tell you. I'd first identify myself as your son. Then I'd utterly destroy the papers."

"Destroy them?"

"Cert! First, however, I'd destroy *you*, but do it in such a way that the crime would fall upon the Martens' shoulders. Then, being your natural heir, I'd scoop in the whole business like a little man!"

Norris leaned back in his chair and gazed at his offspring, aghast!

"You devil!" he finally articulated.

"Exactly," was the retort—"a whittling from the aged block!"

"Thank you. And it was in the hands of such a man as you that you wanted me to intrust fifty thousand dollars?"

"Most assuredly!"

"Then, sir, I will inform you, once, and for all time, that I wouldn't trust you with fifty cents!"

"Then, I suppose there is no further necessity of prolonging this interview?"

"Not the least, sir."

"And you defy me?"

"If you call refusal defiance—yes!"

Garrick arose, with a face white with passion, and quitted the office.

"Curse him!" he gritted, when out of doors, his very being consumed with rage—"oh! curse him! curse him! curse him!"

CHAPTER XVII.

NORRIS'S LITTLE COUNTERPLOT.

NICHOLAS NORRIS did not sleep that night with any too great soundness, for, believing his son to be of as treacherous a nature as himself, he naturally anticipated that Garrick would seek to obtain revenge upon him; but the night passed and no murderous attempt was made.

When the mine magnate arose, in the morning, it was with one fixed plan in his mind, and that plan he proceeded to put into speedy execution.

He was abroad, bright and early, and, watchful as a hawk, he was soon rewarded by meeting Kid Glove Kate face to face.

"Good-morning to you, Miss Kitty!" he saluted, tipping his hat, gallantly. "I have been watching for your appearance, for some time."

"Indeed? Have you? And why so, Mr. Norris?"

"Because, Kitty, I have something to say to you, of importance. If you will join me in a short stroll I will enlighten you."

"That is not necessary, sir. If you have anything to say you can say it here as well as elsewhere."

"Very well, I will, then. Kid Glove Kate, we have met a number of times. We have played cards together, we have drank together, and we have chatted together. In all that time, I have never but once tried to penetrate your identity, and I don't propose to do so now! Who or what you are, or anything of your past, I am not anxious to learn. One thing is certain, however, and the sooner you know it perhaps, the better: I am infatuated with you—I love you, madly. I have come, this morning, to startle you, and startle the camp—I have come to ask you to be my wife!"

"Your wife, sir?" in great surprise.

"My wife. I'll take you for better or for worse, and make you the queen of my home. Understand, I will not even ask to see your face until you are legally mine. Do not refuse now, for, consider the riches you are marrying, to say nothing of my love for you."

"You're a strange man, Mr. Norris. I never expected anything like this from you, I am sure."

"Didn't you? Well, maybe not. But it is just as pleasant, because it is a surprise, is it not?"

"Why—I—I—don't know, I am sure. Mr. Norris, you have some other motive in wishing to marry me, than your professed love."

"My love is not professed, Kitty—it is genuine. But I will also admit that I have a motive. You can help me to keep the Lightning Lode from falling into the hands of the Martens. Once my wife, you would be interested, and with your assistance I can beat them, in spite of the devil. Will you marry me?"

"When?"

"At once—to-day, at noon!"

"I will, on conditions!"

"Name them!"

"They are that you will marry me in public, so that, afterward, there will be no chance for denial."

"Very good; I will have the affair announced, and the ceremony shall take place upon the veranda of the hotel, at sharp twelve. Can I depend upon your being there?"

"You can!"

The parties of this quickly-made match then separated, Norris making tracks for Red Ryan's. "So far, so far!" he muttered. "Frank is very crafty, but when he told of the man finding the papers, it occurred to me instantly, that he was lying. It wasn't a man who found them, but a woman! And what other woman in Lightning Lode unless it was Kid Glove Kate? Ha! ha! my son; your dad is a bit smarter than you think. Of course Kate has the papers. If she had not, (and having them did not see a way paved, at my proposal, for future ease,) would she have accepted an old gray-head like me? Ah! no. She is too keen an adventuress for that. She may make a good wife—but, at all events, what care I as long as I get my grip upon the papers and the mine? Bah! not a whit! It's fortune I crave—it's fortune I'll have!"

Bicycle Ben had passed a good night of rest and repose in his room at the hotel, going back in his dreams to his home in Vista Valley, and

dreaming that he saw Martha and the babe alive and well.

When he awoke it was to hear the cry of an infant, and he sat up in bed and rubbed his eyes to make sure that he really was awake and not dreaming.

Yes, he was awake, it was certain, for the daylight was shining in at the window, and—

The plaintive cry of an infant still reached his hearing.

He gazed down beside him upon the bed, and then uttered an ejaculation of surprise.

Was his reason leaving him?

Could it be true, what he saw?

For there upon the bed, clad in the same white dress in which he had last seen it, was the identical babe of his and poor Martha's adoption.

There could be no mistake; he recognized it in an instant, and with a glad cry caught it up in his arms and rained passionate kisses upon its sweet little face.

Then it came back to him that Martha was not there—sweet, loving, faithful Martha—that she was down beneath the ground that men's ruthless feet tramp upon—that he would never see her face or hear her gentle voice again—her sweet, dear voice, singing plaintive lullabies to this innocent, unworldly waif.

Brave in battle or in peril, this man was now forced to weaken, as tender memories came flooding back upon him: and burying his face in the pillow, with the child held close to his breast, he sobbed as though his heart would break.

At length, however, he got the better of his grief, and laying the baby down, arose and dressed; and it was not until then that he discovered a note pinned to the babe's dress.

It was written in a cramped, irregular hand, and ran as follows:

"BICYCLE BEN:—

"This child, I think, is the one that was stolen from you when your wife was murdered. If not, you can notify me at once. It was left in Lightning Lode by unknown parties some time ago. Red Ryan adopted it, and has hired a miner's wife to care for it. I have stolen it. The woman is drunk, and drugged in the bargain, and so will not miss it soon. If you recognize it, get the hotel-keeper's wife to care for it, and let no one know you have it—unless, of course, you wish to."

"Yours,

"KID GLOVE KATE."

Ben did just as directed, the landlady readily volunteering to attend to the child and keep it "shady."

After breakfast he went out upon the street, and almost the first man he met was Casper Cutch.

The clerk did not look as if he had rested well, for his eyes wore a haggard expression, and he appeared considerably dispirited.

"Good-morning!" he said, intercepting Ben. "If you'll excuse me, I'd like to have a few moments' conversation with you!"

"Certainly. I am at your service. Have a cigar and we'll stroll as we smoke!"

"Thank you. I presume you will wonder what the nature of my errand is, sir?"

"Oh! no, not that I know of. Not in love, are you?" and he looked inquiringly into the forlorn face of Cutch, which reddened in an instant, at the query.

"Do I look as though I was in love?" he demanded.

"Well—yes—that, or some other heart trouble."

"Well, I *am* in love, and am not ashamed to own it. The matter I have to speak of bears on that same thing. I dropped into Jacobs's awhile ago, and learned from Miss Myra that you had paid them a visit last evening."

"So I did."

"You propose to espouse the Martens' cause, I believe?"

"I do."

"Now, will I offend if I ask you what you think of Myra?"

"Certainly not. She is a very pretty girl."

"Oh! yes. I am well enough aware of that. But, that is not what I mean. What are your intentions toward her?"

"Ah! I think I see—a little twinge of jealousy, eh? Well! well! What has Miss Marten been saying?"

"That isn't what I asked you!" Cutch retorted, in dead earnest.

"Well, Mr. Cutch, my intentions toward Miss Marten are simply the same as toward her mother—friendship, and such assistance as I may be able to be to them."

"And no more?"

"No more, I assure you. I am not at present on the susceptible list."

"Then, as you raise a weight of anxiety from my mind, allow me to thank you. You see, I have fallen desperately in love with Myra, and she knows it, but as yet I've never got my courage up to the sticking point to propose. This morning—Myra was looking for me, I thought, for she stood in the doorway—I went down to the store, to buy something. I always buy something, you know, as an excuse for going there. The minute I entered, Myra says: 'Have you seen Bicycle Ben this morning? He paid us a call last evening, and is going to help us. I think he is just a love of a fellow!' Now, you know, that made me feel kind of ragged-edged, and so I thought I'd just come and out with the whole business to you!"

"I am glad you did, for I can give you the comforting assurance that I shall in no way stand between you and Miss Myra. Do you think she is fond of you?"

"Well, she rather acted so, until—"

"Until I came, eh?"

"Yes."

"Well, I guess it will be all right; we'll try and make it so, anyhow. By the way, Cutch, do you propose to go back to work for Norris?"

"No, sir! I've done with him. I've got a penny of my own saved up, and I can stand it for a time without work."

"Good! Don't you go to work again for the rascal. See here, Cutch, you know something against that man, which, if made public, would injure him and help the Martens."

"You only think so."

"Bah! I know so. I can read you like a book, and—"

Just then a boy thrust an unsealed note into Ben's hands.

It was in the chirography of Kid Glove Kate, and ran as follows:

"BICYCLE BEN:—I tender you a special invitation to be present at my wedding, which takes place upon the veranda of the Snortin' Snake Hotel, at twelve, sharp, to-day. I am to marry Nicholas Norris. Do not fail to be present, as, if things work right, there will be some new developments for the Martens' case. Be sure and invite them to be present."

"This may surprise you, but, even a greater surprise is in store for you and them. The pulley, over which a certain man's allowance of rope has been playing, has worn out; consequently the rope must have become worn thin, and will easily break."

"KID GLOVE KATE."

She had hit it: Bicycle Ben was surprised.

He read the letter over and over, and hardly knew what to make of it.

Finally, he turned to Cutch.

"Casper," he said, "I firmly believe that to-day winds up Nicholas Norris's career in Lightning Lode. To-morrow, without doubt, the Martens will be in power. Now, I'll tell you what I'll do: You know much about Norris's affairs. If you'll make what you know public to-day, when called upon to do so, I'll use all my influence toward bringing you and Myra together, as man and wife!"

"You will?" Cutch said, eagerly.

"I will!"

"Then I will tell all I know, bearing in favor of the case, and it is a good deal, I assure you."

"Very good. Be here, by the hotel, at twelve!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

BEN SECURES THE PAPERS.

BICYCLE BEN then went to the dwelling-place of the Martens, and had a brief interview with the two ladies, after which he took his departure, and was not seen about the street, during the forenoon.

The news of the approaching marriage of Kid Glove Kate, the Mysterious, to Nicholas Norris, spread like wild-fire, and, as may be surmised, created an unprecedented sensation throughout the camp. Many were the conjectures as to the cause of the sudden match, and the hints, as usual, were rather detrimental to the masked woman, whose identity was so carefully held a secret.

At Norris's orders, work was suspended in the mine and at the mill, and the laborers were ordered to make ready to congratulate their employer at his wedding.

By the time the report had got pretty well circulated, Gilbert Garrick made his appearance at the Roaring Ram.

Before entering the den, his face was dark and gloomy, but when he entered, a wonderful change was noticeable. His face wore an exultant expression, and he seemed overflowing with good-humor.

Red Ryan was attending bar in person, and nodded carelessly at Garrick's approach.

"Good-morning!" the latter said, slapping a gold-piece down upon the bar. "I'll have a cock-tail, Mr. Ryan. Will you do me the honor to join me?—and, gents, all of you are included in this matutinal smile!"

The drinks were had; then the crowd drew aloof.

"Where's our friend, Black Bret?" Garrick ventured to ask, lighting a cigar.

"Gone!" Ryan briefly replied, unwilling to admit that he had been 'sold out by the sheriff.'

"Gone, has he? Did he make any kick about his money?"

"No. He went away some time during the night."

"Sensible not to make a fuss, eh? Heard about the new racket of his nibs, Nicholas Norris?"

"Yes!"

"What opinion have you formed about it?"

"None. Been too busy. Very singular affair, eh?"

"Decidedly so. It takes my breath clean away. It has no effect upon our dealings, however. The money will be ready at eleven o'clock."

"It will?"

"That is what I said, I believe."

"Very well. You bring it here at that hour, and the papers will be ready for you."

"Honor bright?"

"Honor bright."

"Then the matter is settled; shake!"

The two shook hands, and Garrick went back in the direction of his father's house.

"Ryan will get the papers," he muttered, "and I must get the money. Fortunately, I once upon a time paid a nocturnal visit to my royal dad's safe, but left everything untouched, for the simple reason that I had the future in view. If the old man has not changed the combination, and I can catch him out of the office, fifty thousand is mine, if not more."

After Garrick's departure, Red Ryan glanced at his watch.

"Nine o'clock," he muttered. "El Creole is to have the money at eleven, eh? I shall have to be moving. I wonder how the infernal scoundrel will raise the sum? But, why bother my head about that. As long as I get the fifty thousand, I should be satisfied, for, with what other lucre I have managed to acquire, I'll skip out of these parts, as I opine there will be weird music for crooked folk, hereabouts, directly, providin' Bicycle Ben gets into office as sheriff, which ain't at all improbable. Although I don't know as I fear him, I'd just as lief be out of a community of which he is a resident."

Calling to the bartender to be on duty, Ryan slipped from the place, by the rear door, and left the camp, along its outskirts.

When half a mile below town, he turned into a short transverse gorge and followed it to its end, which was in the face of a gigantic wall of rock, that rose far toward the clouds.

The bottom of this gorge was filled with boulders and the place was none too light, even in daytime.

Searching about among the rocks he finally selected one of no great size, and putting his shoulder against it, rolled it to one side.

Then, stooping over, he took from a little cavity, two bundles of papers.

"Ha! These are what will send me back East, a nabob!" he cried, exultantly. "No more rum-selling, for me!"

"I'm glad to hear that!"

It was a deep, sonorous voice that uttered the words, and Ryan wheeled, with a fearful oath.

The sight he beheld caused him to drop the papers to the ground.

Perched comfortably upon a rock, but a few yards away, sat Black Bret—a strange smile upon his face.

In either hand he grasped a six-shooter, full cocked, and ready for "business," as each weapon was leveled full at Red Ryan.

For a moment Ryan's astonishment and rage were too great for utterance.

But, Bret spoke for him:

"Good-mornin', Ryan! That was good liquor you set out, last night. I never had anything keep me more wide awake in my life, you can bet! Any particular brand to it? Would like to lay in a bar'l. The wine was good, too! Mixed beautiful, with the whisky!"

"Curse you! what do you want here?" Ryan gasped, trembling, in spite of himself, for he could fairly feel those keen, penetrating eyes.

"Why, those papers, of course. You took my bags of dust and nuggets, and I'll take the papers!"

"No! I'll be eternally—"

"Stop, Ryan! Stir an inch, or move a hand,

and I'll murder you where you stand. Do you know who I am?"

"No! nor do I care."

"Well, I am Bicycle Ben, alias Yreka Jim, avenger and detective!"

Stern and ringing came these words!

And a shade of pallor crept over the face of the gambler road-agent.

"Well?" he huskily demanded.

"I followed you here, through overhearing you and El Creole, last night. I suppose you know what I have in store for the latter."

"Yes. But, believe me or not, I was not concerned in the murder of your wife!"

"How came you to have the child?"

"El Creole had it, and didn't want it. He was going to kill it only I prevailed upon him to spare its life. I told him to drop it in Lightning Lode and I would adopt it. He did so, and I took it in, and provided the best accommodations I could for it! and soon got very much attached to the youngster."

He spoke so candidly that Ben was inclined to believe him.

"So you have a spark of humanity about you, after all, have you?" he said.

"You must judge for yourself, about that. I once had a wife and two children. My wife went to the bad, and that put me off the track, but I never forgot to provide for my children, oh! no!"

"I am glad to hear it. Perhaps you're not so bad a fellow, after all. Are you willing that I should have those papers?"

Red Ryan was silent a few moments, and looked steadily at the ground.

"Yes!" he said, finally raising his head, "you can have them. I don't want 'em!"

"Very well. Now, I want you to promise me one thing. If I'll let you go, will you take time by the forelock, get out of this country and lead a better life?"

"I will—I'll give you my word of honor for it. I had already made up my mind to that effect. I'll go back and see my children."

"Then give me your hand, and I'll wish you good luck!"

Ben thrust his weapons into his belt, and held out his hand.

With tears in his eyes Red Ryan seized it, and wrung it warmly.

"God bless you!" he articulated, hoarsely. "If all men were like you there'd be less rogues!"

Then brushing past Ben he strode swiftly away, never looking back, and was soon lost to view.

Bicycle Ben having secured the much-coveted papers, retraced his steps toward Lightning Lode, satisfied in having accomplished one good, for he fully believed that Red Ryan would keep his promise.

There was one man in Lightning Lode, however, who would not get off so easily, and that man—if indeed it were not a disgrace to the word man, to apply it to him—was Gilbert Garrick, otherwise Dick Dryden, otherwise Frank Norris, otherwise El Creole!

No! there was no mercy in the heart of Yreka Jim, for the inhuman murderer of his wife, and feeling sure that the crisis was not far away, his face grew darker as he strode back into camp.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE WEDDING OF DEATH.

As Bicycle Ben neared the dwelling and office of Nicholas Norris, he saw a man trying a window, at the rear of the house.

His suspicions at once arcused—for he saw that the man was Gilbert Garrick—he dodged into a place where he would both be concealed, and could see what was going on.

The window which Garrick tried was not strongly fastened, for he soon had it raised. Fastening it up with a stick, he clambered up, and into the house.

The window opened into a kitchen, but as Nicholas Norris kept bachelor's hall, there were no servants about.

Without pausing in the kitchen, Garrick passed into the next room, and then into the next, and finally reached the office.

In one corner of the room stood a good-sized safe, and to this the mine-owner's rascally son made his way.

"Before me lies my fortune!" he chuckled, "and if there's enough of it, to make it worth my while to skip, I'll let the papers go, and make for parts unknown. The next thing on the programme is to get the safe open, and that

is an easy matter, providing the old man hasn't changed the combination."

Kneeling by the safe, he proceeded to manipulate the plated knob, which opened the safe.

A few minutes of studious trying proved to him that he had a larger job before him than he had bargained for.

"Curses upon the old man! He's done it, sure enough—changed the combination, and I'm dished, unless I can blunder upon the right key!" he grunted, savagely:

"You are dished, anyway, murderer!"

Fierce came the words, and, looking around, he beheld Bicycle Ben standing near, grasping a revolver.

White as death, the cowardly wretch now grew, and staggeringly he got upon his feet.

"You?" he gasped, quaking and trembling in every joint.

"Yes, I!" Ben replied, his face darkening.

"Did you not know me when you first saw me?"

"Yes, but—"

"You thought I didn't know you, in that disguise?"

The villain merely nodded.

He was so terrified at being confronted by the man he had so terribly wronged that he was incapable of speech.

"And, so there's where you deceived yourself, Dick Dryden, alias El Creole, alias Gilbert Garrick, and God only knows how many more aliases. I am here to avenge the cold-blooded murder of my wife, villain! You need not beg for mercy, for the time-told border code of 'a life for a life' shall be adhered to. I will, however, be more merciful than most men would be. Here!" and he hurled a dirk knife so that its point became imbedded in the floor. "Take that knife, and plunge it through your black heart, or I'll send a bullet crashing through your brain!"

With a look of unutterable horror, Garrick bent forward to pick up the knife.

He did not lay hands upon it, nor did he straighten up—but went crashing face downward upon the floor, the blood spurting from his mouth and nostrils.

Bicycle Ben quickly knelt beside him, rolled him over, and placed his hand over his heart.

It had ceased to beat.

And in a few minutes more he was dead.

Had his terror killed him?

Or had the All-wise One prevented a fulfillment of the border code?

Who shall know, or tell?

Long before noon the street in front of the hotel was packed with people, as only a few were to be allowed to occupy the veranda.

Excitement and hubbub were the order of the hour, for the approaching marriage was the first to be consummated in Lightning Lode.

The minister who had given up his church and preaching, and turned miner, was to officiate.

Promptly at the hour of twelve, Nicholas Norris led Kid Glove Kate from the hotel, out upon the veranda, and there was a feeble cheer from the few of the audience who felt obliged to honor him.

The two took their position, facing the street, while the minister stood at one side.

In addition to this trio, the other occupants of the veranda were the hotel proprietor and his wife, Mambrinus Maccaw and Mrs. and Myra Marten, and Casper Cutch.

Bicycle Ben stood down in front among the crowd.

As soon as the couple had taken their positions, the minister assisted them to clasp hands. The next instant there was a cry of rage!

The wrists of Nicholas Norris were encircled by a pair of handcuffs.

The crowd set up a shout of astonishment, as they saw this, and saw Kid Glove Kate cover the mine-owner with a revolver.

"Ten thousand devils!" Norris yelled. "Release my hands. What is the meaning of this outrage?"

"It means, Nick Norris, that you are a prisoner—my prisoner!" Kid Glove Kate replied, in a clear, calm voice. "Your wedding has not yet taken place. When it does take place it will be a wedding of death!"

"A wedding of death!" the villain gasped, his face blanching with horror.

"Ay! a wedding of death. You are the murderer of Melvin Marten!"

"'Tis false—damnably false. Curse you! free my hands!"

"Oh! no. They are better confined. Melvin Marten was murdered, and there was a witness

to the crime. You know there was. But, as you were not troubled, you flattered yourself that your guilt would never be known. Having an old will of Marten's making, you laid claim to the property."

"It don't matter if a new will does exist," the wretch broke forth; "the lode is mine. I advanced more money to open it and to build the cableway than two such mines are worth!"

"And for every dollar you expended the mine has paid you two or more," Casper Cutch cried. "I have a duplicate of all your accounts, papers and everything. The Lightning Lode does not owe you a cent."

Norris glared at his clerk, but could not speak, his rage was so great.

"The Martens are the rightful heirs to the mine," Kate said, "and shall have it. Although their will has been lost—"

"It has been found!" Bicycle Ben shouted, waving the papers in the air. "I've got the documents in my grip, and they're all O. K.!"

At this there was a tremendous cheer.

"Curse you—curse you all!" Norris raved, furiously.

"Cursing will do you no good!" Kate replied. "You murdered Melvin Marten, and you know it, and you're going to be interviewed by Judge Lynch! Do you want to make a confession?"

"No! no! I never committed a murder in my life!"

"Bah! Do you want to see the man who witnessed the crime?"

"Yes!"

"Mose Williams come forward!" Kate called out.

The negro at once appeared, looking a bit scared.

"Did you witness the murder, Mose?"

"Yes, 'm!"

"Who killed Melvin Marten?"

"Dat man, sah!"

"You saw him do it?"

"Yes, sah—ma'am!"

"Relate how you became a witness."

"Well, sah—ma'am—I was workin' fo' Marse Marten, an' got orful hungry. He used to keep de vittles in de shed, an' nights I'd 'coon 'em. Dis 'ticer night I see'd Norris skulkin' round de cabin, an' I watched. Seed 'im go in, peeked in de window, an' see'd Norris stick de marse wid a knife as he lay 'sleep."

Just then there was a heavy fall.

Nicholas Norris had fainted.

But it made no difference to the men of Lightning Lode. Wild with indignation, they rushed upon him, and in a few minutes more the villain was dangling from the nearest tree.

The rest can be summed up briefly.

When order was brought out of that chaos, Kid Glove Kate removed her mask and false hair.

Before the people stood the missing lawyer, Buckley Barras! He had ferreted out the crime and been instrumental in bringing Norris to justice.

The father and son were buried in one grave, and no one mourned their loss.

Mrs. Marten, of course, came into possession of her rights, and appointed Barras her manager. It is possible that she will marry him.

Cutch got back his old position, and by Bicycle Ben's, or more appropriately, Yreka Jim's, intervention, won Myra's promise that she would marry him at Christmas.

When Yreka Jim left Lightning Lode, he left the babe in Mrs. Marten's motherly care, and with him went the "howlin' hydra-headed he-up-an'-haw!"—the ludicrous giant, Mambrinus Maccaw!

THE END.

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